

SEVENTH

4



Author **Yomu Mishima**
Illustrator **Tomozo**



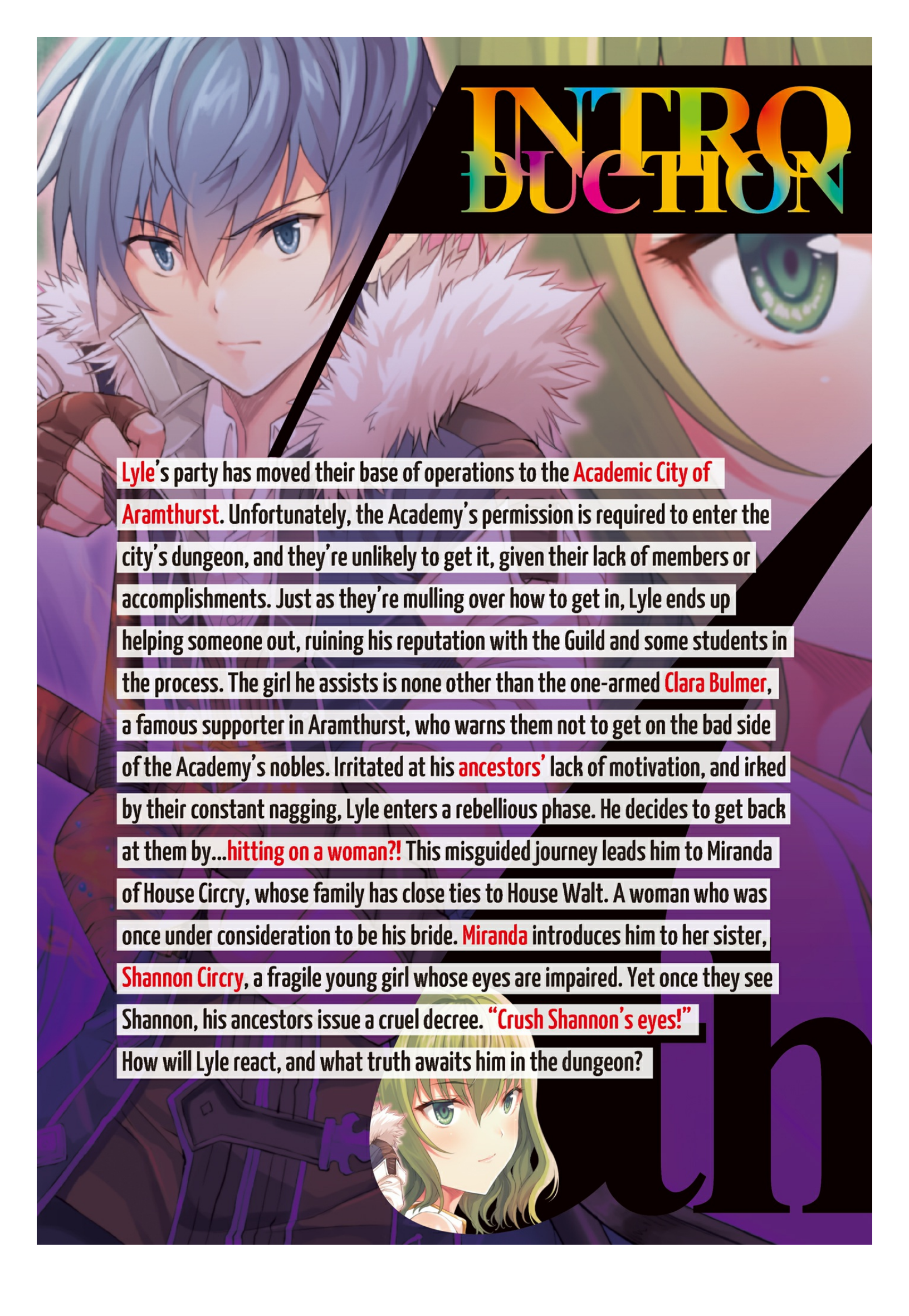
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INTRODUCTION

Lyle's party has moved their base of operations to the **Academic City of Aramthurst**. Unfortunately, the Academy's permission is required to enter the city's dungeon, and they're unlikely to get it, given their lack of members or accomplishments. Just as they're mulling over how to get in, Lyle ends up helping someone out, ruining his reputation with the Guild and some students in the process. The girl he assists is none other than the one-armed **Clara Bulmer**, a famous supporter in Aramthurst, who warns them not to get on the bad side of the Academy's nobles. Irritated at his **ancestors'** lack of motivation, and irked by their constant nagging, Lyle enters a rebellious phase. He decides to get back at them by...**hitting on a woman?!** This misguided journey leads him to Miranda of House Circry, whose family has close ties to House Walt. A woman who was once under consideration to be his bride. **Miranda** introduces him to her sister, **Shannon Circry**, a fragile young girl whose eyes are impaired. Yet once they see Shannon, his ancestors issue a cruel decree. "**Crush Shannon's eyes!**" How will Lyle react, and what truth awaits him in the dungeon?

SEVENTH

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage

Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage

Limit Burst

Allows user to exhibit strength beyond their physical limits while temporarily ignoring the burden on their body.

Third Stage

Full Burst

A blue flame envelops the user's body, significantly increasing physical abilities.

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage

All

The user can grant their Arts to others. The user perceives all applicable targets in a nearby radius, effectively eliminating blind spots.

Second Stage

Field

The user can grant their Arts to a large group. It boasts a wider effective range than All.

Third Stage

???

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage

???

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Fourth Head



Marcus Walt

First Stage

Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages

Fifth Head



Fredriks Walt

First Stage

Map

Grants the ability to view one's surroundings as a map.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Sixth Head



Fiennes Walt

First Stage

Search

Distinguishes friend from foe, and identifies the location of traps among other things.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Seventh Head



Brod Walt

First Stage

???

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???



Lyle Walt

First Stage

Experience

Allows the user to gain more experience. Effects their surroundings as well.

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages	Author Yomu Mishima	
Prologue		
Chapter 44	Miranda Circry	
Chapter 45	The Orphic Eyes of House Walt	
Chapter 46	Damian Valle's Request	
Chapter 47	Preparations	
Chapter 48	Shannon Circry	
Chapter 49	Aramthurst's Dungeon	
Chapter 50	Floor Boss	
Chapter 51	A Formidable Foe	
Chapter 52	The Circry Sisters	
Chapter 53	Automaton	
Chapter 54	Monster	
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Epilogue	A Day Off in Central	

Illustrator
Tomozo

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Prologue

You know, I thought idly as I strode down the streets of the Academic City of Aramthurst, responsibility can be a pretty heavy thing.

Now that I—Lyle Walt, a former noble and the eldest son of an earl—had taken charge of an adventuring party, I understood what it was like to shoulder a fair bit of the stuff.

Before now, I'd been quite the oblivious well-to-do brat, having lived a very isolated life on my family's estate—at least that was how most people would describe me, if asked. All of that had changed, though, when my little sister, Ceres, had trounced me in a fight and driven me from House Walt. Now I was an adventurer, the leader of my party, and—I thought, at least—someone who'd gotten to know a little about what a burden responsibility could be.

It had been my decision to switch my party's home base from Darion to Aramthurst, a task we were on our way to officially complete. Darion had been quite the convenient place for a group of beginners, but the Academic City of Aramthurst was where people gathered to study and pick up new skills.

I glanced around Aramthurst's streets as I trudged forward, my three other party members at my side. The city was a complete mishmash, with many buildings being constructed in ways that could only be called eccentric. The buildings seemed proud of their odd architecture as well, each one looming high over our heads, as if piercing the sky in a competition to see which of them could grow the tallest.

The long shadows of these bizarre structures were all that shielded us from the blazing sun, but despite their shade, I could see the sheen of sweat breaking out on all the girls' brows. Regardless, we did our best to avoid stepping onto any of the parts of the brick-paved path struck by the sun as we walked on.

Hey, wait, I thought, staring at the bricks beneath my feet. Wasn't the path made of stone just a moment ago...?

“There’s no consistency in this place at all,” I said, snorting as I smoothed my blue hair back with one hand. I could feel the dampness of my own sweat under my fingers.

The heat was so bad that I’d long shrugged off my jacket and tucked it under one arm, which revealed the silver pendant that dangled over my undershirt—an heirloom from House Walt. A shimmering blue gemstone was embedded at its center.

“When I saw this place from the outside, it looked like a little boy’s toy chest to me,” chimed in the red-haired girl who was walking a few steps behind me. Her name was Aria Lockwood, and at the moment she had quite the energetic vibe. “The city really feels like that on the inside too.”

I nodded in agreement. *Yeah, each building has its own...uniqueness, I guess. The incongruity really does give off a messy toy box feeling.*

Aria’s purple eyes darted over to another member of our party—Sophia Laurie. She was wearing a black robe and had a battle-axe on her back that had been passed down in her family for generations. Sweat was pouring down her face, and she kept having to raise a hand to push back her long black hair and wipe it away again and again.

“Even looking at you makes me feel more hot,” Aria said, giving the other girl an exhausted look. “Why don’t you just ditch that robe?”

“I am maintaining my dignity while preventing sunburn,” Sophia declared, giving Aria a stern look with her intimidating dark-black eyes. “What I’m wearing beneath this robe is quite similar to what you have on right now, Aria. I...could *never* walk around like that in *public*.”

I sighed. *Sophia’s far too earnest to be an adventurer, I thought. Maybe that part of her personality is due to the influence of that house of vassal knights she hails from.*

From what Sophia had said, it sounded like she was wearing clothing that was built for mobility beneath her robe, but she was violently opposed to removing her overgarment and exposing any more of her skin. I watched as Sophia scanned Aria from head to toe, face reddening with embarrassment over how Aria’s clothing accentuated the lines of her body.

In contrast, Aria seemed completely unperturbed by what she was wearing.

Hmm... I thought. Aria's originally from a noble house too—a barony no less. That means she was of a higher rank than Sophia. So if her earnestness isn't because of her house's rank...where does it actually come from?

As I was distracted with these thoughts, Sophia wrapped her arms around herself, as if to conceal her chest. The motion compelled Aria to glance down at her own bosom, which was...

I probably shouldn't dare to make such a comparison, but...hers are, uh, quite a bit smaller than Sophia's...

“What are those two idiots doing?” snapped a cold male voice. “And Lyle, keep your eyes to yourself. Novem's not looking too happy.”

I winced. Thankfully, though, the voice came from inside the blue Jewel around my neck, and not from a random passerby who'd decided to poke fun at me.

The Jewel stored the Arts of all the members of my family who had wielded it in the past, and gave me the ability to speak to the reincarnated memories of my ancestors. They could speak directly into my mind, just like the second head—a hunter who'd led House Walt back in its early days—had just now. Not that any of the past heads of House Walt could be called anything close to men of virtue...

“Are you into women's chests, Lyle?” inquired the blond-haired, rather delicate-looking third head. He seemed to be on a mission to add fuel to the fire. “Personally, I prefer the backside. Still, I wouldn't let myself look as intently at either feature as you're doing now. It's quite rude, you know.”

I flushed and looked away.

The heads of House Walt all possessed wonderful qualities and had achieved great things in life. However, perhaps because I was their direct descendant...they attacked me verbally without mercy.

The fourth head, a bespectacled methodical-looking man, gave an exasperated sigh. “How crass. Really, Lyle, you should think about how the women must feel.”

I've never really had a chance to try and learn about women's feelings, let alone the feelings of anyone else... I thought awkwardly.

I'd been confined for so long that I had a hard time interacting with anyone, period. There was also the fact that, for some strange reason, I couldn't remember anything that had happened before I turned ten years old. That was *definitely* a part of the problem. I'd heard that back then, I'd been cheerful, polite, and wise.

Basically, I was completely different from how I am now...

These thoughts were cut off by the fifth head, who had apparently decided to take aim at the fourth head instead of me. "Those don't sound like the words of someone who couldn't even talk back to his wife," he said snidely.

My eyebrows rose as a marked tension spread throughout the Jewel. It was rare for the fifth head to speak at all, let alone sound so uncharacteristically invested. It seemed his father's comment had set him off.

Each of my ancestors possessed all the memories they'd made in their lifetimes, meaning that the relationships they'd had with each other remained the same as they were back then. In short, this meant that any previously existing family strife was now alive once more in the present.

The sixth head laughed heartily, seemingly unbothered by the strain in the air. He was a big man with a head of unkempt hair and a wild beard, and had a larger build than any of my other ancestors currently residing within the Jewel. Despite the rather striking impression he left, he was kinder to me than most of the others, and I'd grown to think of him as an elder brother.

"Lyle's a *man*," he said, bursting out laughing all over again. "It's only natural that he develop an interest in that sort of thing. Why, back when I was young..."

I forced my attention away, refusing to listen to any more of his words. I felt embarrassed just listening to the lot of them! It was like listening to all your relatives poke fun at you during a family gathering.

Finally, the seventh head—who was also my grandfather—decided to step in. He was a man with slicked back hair and a stern look to his features who carried himself with the distinctive air of a noble. Though perhaps he only seemed so

civilized compared to the others...

“We might as well take it from someone who played around all their life,” he said coldly, sending the sixth head a glare.

Well, seems like it's just another typical day with the Jewel, I thought, moaning internally. My ancestors are making general menaces out of themselves like always, bickering and causing the Jewel to suck up my mana.

For better or worse, no one apart from me could hear their conversations—not my comrades, nor any of the people passing us by. Which meant that I had to refrain from carelessly shooting back a response to their infighting, or I'd end up being thought of as some shady guy who liked to talk to himself.

I sighed. *The world's so unfair.*

I felt an itch between my shoulder blades, and turned to find a set of amethyst eyes locked onto me. My guard raised instantly, fear spiking through me.

Is she...going to chastise me for looking at their chests...? I wondered, eyeing our party's magician warily. Her lustrous, fox-colored hair was pulled up into a ponytail on one side of her head, and she wore a navy-blue robe. A silver staff was clutched between her hands.

“Wh-What is it, Novem?” I asked fearfully.

“It's nothing,” she said calmly. “I just noticed that you've been looking tired for a while now.”

I relaxed slightly, letting out a relieved sigh.

Novem Fuchs was my former fiancée, as well as the second daughter of the baron of House Fuchs. Her house had been associated with House Walt for a very long time, which was perhaps one of the reasons she'd chased after me even after I'd been kicked out of my house.

I would have never made it this far without Novem, I thought. I'm sure of it.

I was so sure of it, in fact, that I could barely look her in the eye. She'd taken such good care of me all this time, and she was so beautiful, and incredible with magic... She was practically perfect at everythi—well, maybe perhaps *that*

wasn't quite true, but she was incredibly reliable nonetheless.

"On an unrelated note, milord," she continued, "are you carrying all the necessary documents?"

I reached over my shoulder, quickly producing the paperwork and a handful of silver cards. "I've got them all right here," I reassured her, a little annoyed at her questioning. "You don't have to worry."

The silver cards were called Guild cards, and were created in pairs when you joined a Guild. One would be held by the adventurer, while the other would be kept in the Guild's possession. On the occasion of an adventurer's death, a horizontal line would be slashed through their name on both their personal card they held and the one stored at the Guild, conveniently informing the world of their demise. Also, for whatever reason, Guild cards were not absorbed by dungeons, and couldn't be digested by monsters if swallowed.

Novem's gaze darted over the papers in my hands, and then she said lightly, "Pardon me, then." She inclined her head slightly toward me before facing forward and getting back on her way.

"Don't be so snippy with her," the second head chided from the Jewel. "She was just making sure."

I abruptly felt a little bad. I was quite thankful for Novem's dedication, but I couldn't help but get a bit irritated at the constant reminder of how unreliable I was.

"Do you think he's...*you know*..." the third head said in a hushed, oddly certain tone, "entering his rebellious phase?"

Is it just me, I thought crankily, or is their teasing coming off as rather annoying lately? And all their orders too.

"Hmm..." the fourth head rumbled, oblivious to my thoughts. "That could be it. He's getting to that age..."

I gave the Jewel a quick roll with the tip of my finger, signaling for my ancestors to shut up.

“Wait, *what?*” I demanded. “We can’t enter the dungeon?”

I was standing in front of the reception desk of Aramthurst’s Guild, having already submitted the necessary forms to confirm our party’s transfer. I’d just finished listening to a briefing on the basic info I’d need to operate as an adventurer within the city, during which I’d learned that Aramthurst’s famous underground dungeon—which was known to be incredibly profitable to those who plumbed its depths—was not accessible to us.

The receptionist gave me a deadpan look through the round lenses of his glasses. “Adventurers without ability or credibility are unable to enter the dungeon,” he repeated in a matter-of-fact tone. “That’s the rule here.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, taking in his slender physique and the rather barren patch atop his head. The man had nothing in common with Hawkins, our receptionist back in Darion, who’d handled us with nothing but the utmost consideration. *This guy* was making it blatantly clear he looked down on us.

What a pain, I thought, grimacing internally. *Though we do have some financial leeway, and we mostly came to Aramthurst to study, not to tackle the dungeon. Honestly, it isn’t that big a problem that we can’t get in there, except...* I froze, a realization hitting me. *Except that’s not true at all, is it?*

“Is there anything we can do about this?” I demanded, focusing back on the receptionist. “What exactly do we have to do to gain the Guild’s permission to enter the dungeon?”

“You can gain credibility by hunting down monsters outside the city and selling a set number of their Demonic Stones to the Guild,” he explained with painstaking slowness. “But even once you accomplish that, your party size is going to be an issue. Were you seriously planning on entering the dungeon with only four party members? That’s nowhere near enough people, even if your equipment is top class.”

I hung my head. *I mean, we were already aware that we were on the smaller side for a party—that’s part of the reason we came to Aramthurst in the first place. We were always going to try and recruit more people. But still, at this rate...*

“That means we’re going to have to go and hunt monsters under the blazing

sun, though..." I found myself muttering.

"Is that not an adventurer's job?" the receptionist asked, ice cold. "Please, just hurry up and face your reality and go collect us some Stones. Good grief, don't we have enough to deal with, having to struggle through times like the summer and winter when the Stone yield drops? Please, don't exacerbate the problem."

The receptionist's eyes bored into me, as if he was silently saying, "We're done here, now get moving!"

Jeez, I thought, taking the hint and shuffling away. That guy's seriously got it out for adventurers. He totally iced me out.

But his frigid reception wasn't the issue at the forefront of my mind. *It's going to be a trial and a half to fight monsters in the height of summer, with this sort of heat beating down on us.* My shoulders drooped as I thought over our situation. *We're going to have to prowl around the surrounding plains looking for monsters as we lug around heavy supplies, all while somehow managing to maintain enough energy to fight.* I tried to picture it in my head. *Well, for starters, we're going to need to take more breaks than usual, lest we end up collapsing. We're going to be expending much more stamina than usual, and... I heaved a sigh. And though it depends on the type of monsters out there, I doubt this is going to be particularly profitable for us.*

As I thought this depressing information over, I made my way across the floor of Aramthurst's Guild and back toward the spot where my comrades stood. The city's Guild was located in a relatively small two-story building, the first floor housing the reception area and lobby as well as several bulletin boards that were plastered with a variety of jobs.

As I explained the situation to them, Novem's expression clouded over. "That is troubling indeed," she murmured. "I'd never heard that Aramthurst had such rules before."

Aria and Sophia both had confused looks on their faces, though—apparently they hadn't quite grasped the problem yet.

"But...didn't we earn a lot of money back in Darion?" Aria asked, tilting her head. "We should be fine for a while, shouldn't we?"

She wasn't wrong about that—we'd participated in a dungeon subjugation before we left Darion, and we'd netted ourselves a pretty good profit in the process. However...it wasn't going to be enough.

"That money may have tided us over in Darion, but we've got to recalculate based on the cost of living here in Aramthurst," Novem explained. "Staying at a reputable inn is going to cost a sizable amount, and learning the new skills we came here for isn't going to be free."

"Yes, I see," Sophia said, nodding in agreement. "But I still thought we wouldn't have to make such a fuss over picking up work."

The second head let out a growl from within the Jewel. I winced—for whatever reason, he tended to take a harsher attitude when speaking about Aria and Sophia.

"Does she seriously not understand that you aren't affluent enough to just study without doing any work?" he asked, scoffing. "Plus, if you take too much time off, you guys are going to lose your edge. I mean, she doesn't think you're going to be playing around in Aramthurst forever, right?"

Despite his harshness, I knew the second head wasn't wrong. There were plenty of reasons why we had to work during our stay in the city. For starters, we intended to search for new comrades while we were in Aramthurst, which meant we'd be better off frequenting the Guild so we could gather information. Additionally, like the second head had said, we shouldn't devote ourselves entirely to academics, lest we dull our battle senses.

On top of that, although we were currently only a party of four members, if we were successful, that number would grow to five or six. Once our party expanded, we'd have to find a way to pay for everyone's food and lodging. The expenses would add up pretty quick.

Maintaining everyone's equipment also costs money. Even if we weren't using them regularly, it was still essential that we keep them in good condition. In my case, I'd need to keep an eye on my saber. I couldn't just set it aside because I wasn't using it to cut anything. The same rule applied to everyone else; they had to treat their equipment with respect and look after their things on a daily basis. Our tools were, after all, items that we entrusted our lives to

every time we went out into the field.

“Whether it’s knowledge or techniques, the more necessary they are, the more time and money they’ll cost to obtain,” Novem explained. “We’ll need to work to a moderate degree...but going outside the city will be problematic.”

Clearly Novem already fully understood the difficulties ahead of us, and I could see Sophia was slowly catching on as well. “Come to think of it,” she murmured, face going stiff, “it’s going to be difficult for us to work given the season. It’s only going to get hotter from here, and if we went outside the city...”

I nodded. The dungeon might be riddled with danger, but at least we wouldn’t have to worry about the heat while we were inside. Many dungeons adapted their environments to be comfortable for humans, in a bid to entice them to stay inside their walls and wander deeper into their depths. From what I’d heard, Aramthurst’s dungeon fell into this category.

It would be easier for us to earn money in the dungeon as well. We would be able to count on a certain number of monsters being contained within the dungeon’s limited space, which was far more efficient than having to head outside the city and wander around searching for a fight.

If we could just enter the dungeon once or twice a month, that would resolve all our financial woes, but...

I sighed. “I didn’t think we’d need the Guild’s permission to enter the dungeon. It seems like their strict criteria’s going to prove a real problem.”

The reality was, we lacked not only the required number of party members to enter the dungeon, but also the credibility we needed to convince the Guild to give us their approval.

Aria frowned, finally grasping our situation. “Aramthurst is a total pain,” she muttered under her breath.

Yeah, I agree, I thought, lips twitching. *But seriously, what are we going to do...?*

We were all silently standing there, wondering if we’d picked the wrong city, when the sound of a disturbance reached our ears. My eyes drifted in the

direction of the noise, quickly locking on to a group of adventurers.

The third head let out a long whistle. “Looks like a gaggle of noble sons, to my eye,” he said nonchalantly. “Maybe they hired some adventurers to join them so they could enter the dungeon? They’re clearly arguing about something.”

“Lyle, leave at once,” the seventh head spat, his voice full of disdain and disinterest. “Don’t get involved.”

I didn’t move right away though, even despite his warning. I was distracted by the blatant aura of danger hovering in the air.

From what I could tell, a group of pompous-looking youths seemed to be prattling away at a lone girl. None of the people standing around seemed to have any intention of getting involved, and the Guild staff who’d trickled out from behind the reception desk seemed to be taking the side of the young men.

Kinda makes me sick, if I’m being honest, I thought, unable to look away.

I could see Sophia’s face out of the corner of my eye, her expression growing uglier and uglier with each word out of the men’s mouths. Listening to their loudly proclaimed grievances, I could understand why.

“A measly supporter like you should be thankful she’s even getting paid at all,” one of the young men sneered. “We were practically risking our lives to protect you, you know!”

I eyed him, and once I managed to look past his overbearing attitude, I saw he was wearing a set of what was clearly *very* expensive equipment. It was the incredible amount of ornamentation that made it obvious—beyond the fact that it was complete overkill, there was no way any of it was necessary for battle.

The young woman he was yelling at was also wearing some pretty unique armor for an adventurer—most of her attire was made of cloth and leather, clearly designed for mobility, while one of her arms was clad in metal from her shoulder to her fingertip. It was as if she was wearing just the arm piece of a suit of armor. Beyond that, she looked pretty small and delicate to my eyes, but the bag on her back—which she seemed to carry as though it was nothing—was large enough that I thought she’d probably fit into it easily. She had her hands

tucked through the bag's straps, and, as far as I could tell, wasn't carrying any weapon of her own.

"I did my job as a supporter," she said in an indifferent tone, her red eyes half-open and almost sleepy-looking behind the lenses of her glasses. "After deducting necessary expenses, the sum I received is incredibly low. I must request that you pay me the amount listed on the contract."

Her insistence sent the pompous man who'd been yelling at her into an irritable silence. He glared at the top of her head, which was covered with roughly cut, unkempt lavender-blue hair.

"H-Hey, you!" cried the Guild receptionist, who'd finally stepped in to stop their arguing. "You're being incredibly rude! You were given the opportunity to work with a *noble*! You should think of it as your chance to gain recognition and —"

"The Guild practically forced me to take this request," the girl said firmly, not budging an inch. Something told me that she couldn't. "This is the third time this has happened. You must realize that I have to make a living."

This time, it was the receptionist who grew irritated at her tone.

The sixth head laughed from within the Jewel. "She sure knows how to speak up, for someone so small," he said with a hint of admiration. "Still, all she's doing acting like that is making herself some enemies. Seems like she's one of those people who're too blunt to get along well in society."

"From what I just heard, that girl's in the right," Sophia muttered. "So why is it turning out like this...?"

Before I could reply, the arrogant youth drew his sword from the sheath at his hip and pointed its tip straight at the girl. "Can't you even do as you're told?!" he demanded.

The girl only twitched in response, her sleepy eyes widening a bit. She made no attempt to move closer to safety.

A sneer stretched across the male adventurer's face. "I put you to use because I heard you were a bit famous, and this is how you treat me? A one-armed brat like you should be satisfied with what you get!"

One-armed...? I wondered, intrigued. I activated the second head's Art, using it to examine her armor-clad left arm.

"It's a prosthetic..." I murmured, eyebrows raising.

It wasn't armor at all—it was a replacement limb made of metal. It seemed to have some range of motion, judging by the metal hand's firm grip on her rucksack.

I wonder how it works... I thought curiously.

But before I could ask any more questions—or have any of my previous musings answered, for that matter—I'd already started moving forward.

"What's this?" the third head asked in a teasing tone. "Looks like you're getting involved, Lyle. Those nobles seem like a prideful bunch, though. I'll have to recommend against it. You could always wait to help her some other tim—"

"Milord," Novem said, unknowingly interrupting the third head's words. Her hand clenched tight around my arm, causing me to stumble to a halt. When I glanced over my shoulder, she was already shaking her head. "We mustn't get involved in a situation like this without knowing the circumstances," she chided me. "Also...she doesn't fit."

I sighed. This last statement, that the girl *didn't fit*, reminded me of a rather large problem I had with Novem. She was a very reliable person, practically perfect in my eyes, except for one thing—for some reason or another, she was always trying to set me up with a harem. She tried to station more and more women around me with every chance she got, but these women had to fulfill certain qualifications first. House Walt had a number of precepts for choosing a bride, you see, and Novem would only select those women who fulfilled every last one of them. This H.C.O., or harem-creation objective, was precisely why Novem had welcomed Aria and Sophia into our party. It was a side of Novem I simply would never be able to understand.

"Whether she fits or not isn't the issue, Novem," I said shortly. "I... It's fine, just stay here."

I shook off Novem's hand, giving up on explaining. Within seconds, I was approaching the group of rowdy nobles once more.

As I drew closer, all their eyes fell on me. They didn't expect my next move, though—I reared back and kicked the haughty young adventurer's sword right out of his hand.

“Wh-What do you think you're doing?” the noble shrieked. “What's your *problem*?! Do you even know who I am?! I'm the son of a viscount who serves the imperial court! And now that you've done that—”

“If you sign a contract, you have to honor it,” I told him indifferently, staring him down. “What's the issue? Did she demand an exorbitant amount or something?”

The young adventurer's face went stiff. “Why the hell would I pay a mere supporter in gold coins?” he spat. “A few silvers should be more than enough!”

The third head chuckled, clearly enjoying his view of the noble's reddening face. “*This* is why court nobles are so bothersome,” he told me. “I hate guys who act like that.”

This information did not surprise me. From what my ancestors had told me, the noble class was divided into two different categories: the nobles who governed Banseim's territories, known as feudal lords, and the nobles who served the king in his court at the capital. The two sides did not get along by any means, and my ancestors from House Walt disliked court nobles just as much as any other feudal house.

The third head let out a little hum of thought, then laughed again. “How about this, Lyle? Why don't you ask that kid, ‘Why exactly can't a son of a viscount spare a few gold coins?’”

I thought it was a decent enough suggestion, so I focused back on the noble adventurer's red face and asked, “Is the son of an exalted viscount so unwilling to part with a handful of gold coins?”

A burst of laughter rang out around the room as the snobbish adventurer's face turned even redder. It seemed my statement had managed to get a few chuckles out of the rest of the adventurers who'd gathered to watch the commotion.

I found it hard to look away from the noble's bulging face, though. *This guy*

better be careful, I thought warily. He's going to get so worked up he pops a vein.

Before I could get too worried, he jammed a hand into his wallet and took out a handful of gold coins. "D-Don't be daft!" he cried. "If you want them so bad, then take them already!"

The whole being made a laughingstock thing must have gotten to him, I thought.

The adventurer scattered the coins across the ground, leaving them for the girl to come and pick up. She took her time collecting them, then carefully stored them before pulling out a few copper and silver coins from her own wallet. She held them out to the still red-faced adventurer.

"What is it now?!" the man howled.

"You've provided me with more than the contracted amount," the girl replied, voice flat.

In short, she was giving him change.

This didn't sit well with the pompous man, and he swatted her hand right out of the air. "Don't you mock me!" he spat. "I don't need your chump change!"

He spun around and stormed out of the Guild, his group of men following after him.

The remaining crowd of adventurers was abuzz, but the Guild receptionist quickly glared them all into silence. "Do you know what you've done?!" he yelled, turning to our party. "Those guys are nobles! They'd only just been referred to us for our services too..." His eyes narrowed. "Make sure you four consider your position from here on out."

And just like that, the receptionist whirled around and strode from the room, taking long, angry steps. I watched his back incredulously as he vanished into the Guild's backroom.

Once he was gone, my dumbfounded gaze fell to the girl, who bowed her head to me in gratitude. "Thank you," she told me politely.

I flushed, feeling a bit bashful. "Ah, no, it was nothing," I stammered.

I guess...I actually did a good thing, I thought.

I was starting to feel pretty pleased with myself when the girl said, “However...I think you’d have probably been better off not getting involved with me in that particular situation.”

My happy mood instantly plummeted. *Did the person I just helped...really just tell me I shouldn’t have gotten involved...?*

After that, we went ahead and left the building, moving to a diner that was a good distance away from Guild.

Aramthurst’s Guild headquarters were housed in a building located right next to the city’s gate, which meant that there were always loads of people coming and going. The terrible cloud of sand which perpetually lingered in the air, along with the animalistic stench of the nearby stables, meant that it was hardly the right place to have a discussion.

That was why the girl I’d helped—whose name was apparently Clara Bulmer—had led us to our current destination. She’d said she wanted to thank me, and this restaurant seemed as good a place as any. On our way here, I’d noticed that Clara was acting much differently than she had at the Guild. When I asked her about it, she told me that what had happened to her today had happened so many times that she’d built up that blunt, deadpan attitude as a defense mechanism. She said she had gotten sick of crying herself to sleep.

As we settled into our seats, I glanced around the diner. *Seems like this place is a popular adventurer hangout, judging by the number of people I see who are clearly in the trade,* I thought.

Meanwhile, Clara was providing us with a simple explanation of how Aramthurst worked. According to her, “In Aramthurst, the Academy is the institution which holds the greatest level of authority. The Academy’s professors are the ones who actually manage the city, although less than half of them actually participate. The nobles here rank just beneath the professors. There are a decent amount of them, since they can use Aramthurst’s status as *the Academic City* as an excuse to come here and further their studies. Still, I’ve heard that the Academy only has so many noble students enrolled because it

raises the prestige of the institution. Most of them just play around, to be honest.”

Apparently, the Academy was a very convenient place to go if you were a noble. The sons who weren’t the first in line to inherit could use the certifications they earned at the institution to gain positions in the imperial court. Some would even go independent and found houses of their own. The Academy was also a good place to grow your personal connections with other nobles, or even to find yourself a husband or a wife.

Clara informed us that most of her recent clients had been such sons of the nobility. This particular time around, the Guild had somewhat forcefully shoved the job onto her. She’d been unable to contain her anger and frustration when she’d found out she wasn’t even going to receive a proper reward after being treated so badly. And so, she’d finally spoken out about what was going on, even though it had pushed her far outside her comfort zone.

I didn’t blame her—how was she supposed to make a living if she couldn’t even get paid for her work?

The bigger mystery, however, was how Clara had managed to devour the immense mass of food she’d eaten as she told us all these details.

Where exactly does she fit all that food in that tiny body? I wondered, aghast. It was quite the conundrum.

“Finally,” Clara explained between bites of yet more food, “let me explain how the Adventurers’ Guild works here. The main thing that distinguishes Aramthurst’s Guild from the Guilds in other cities is that they have a much weaker authority here than the Academy and the nobility. They’re essentially subservient to both groups.”

“But isn’t that kind of strange?” Aria asked, wincing at Clara’s endless appetite. “I mean, why would they look down on adventurers just because of that? Without people like us, they wouldn’t be able to get their hands on any Demonic Stones or monster materials. It’d be nice if they’d value us a bit more...”

Clara plucked a napkin off the table to wipe her mouth. “Aramthurst has a dungeon, remember?” she prodded. “It produces more than enough Demonic

Stones and materials for the city. Plus, the Academy has its own combat team, which is perfectly capable of tackling the dungeon on their own. That's why adventurers are so easily dismissed here. Even the ones who venture outside of the city to hunt down monsters are only seen as slightly less than worthless. And if they ever fail to do their job, it's only seen as a minor grievance."

"That's right!" the seventh head said cheerfully, apparently completely onboard with the way the city was run. "It is the height of folly to leave a dungeon—*especially* one that needs to be managed—in the hands of adventurers. Aramthurst might not have a lord, but they seem to be making the right decisions regardless."

"So, in summary," Sophia said slowly, tilting her head, "you're saying that even if all the adventurers in Aramthurst vanished, the Guild wouldn't be that bothered?"

"That's mostly correct," Clara agreed. "To be more precise, as long as the Guild still has access to the adventurers they use to explore the dungeon, they'll be fine. After all, even if they don't try to recruit at all, adventurers still gather en masse to register. They don't have to put in even an ounce of effort. The only real issue they have to face is that many of their more skilled parties tend to leave after they master their craft."

I let out a thoughtful sigh. *Aramthurst's Guild sure seems like a problematic place...*

"Oh, and you should know that even if you manage to pass all of the Guild's 'qualifications' to enter the dungeon, all that means is that they'll recommend you to the Academy for an evaluation," Clara added. "The actual decision-making power lies in the hands of the Academy. However...at least from the Academy's perspective, nobles aren't just a group that makes up a large portion of their student body—they're also people who invest a lot of money into their city."

This...is starting to sound pretty dicey, I thought warily.

"Basically, if you were hoping to eventually get into Aramthurst's dungeon, it was a real mistake to help me out back there. Now you've incurred the wrath of the Guild *and* the nobles."

“In short,” Novem said, “it’s now going to be quite difficult for us to enter the dungeon.”

Clara nodded. “I mean, I’m sincerely happy that you helped me out,” she said. “I’ll happily thank you for it again. Thank you very much. But if you’re planning on staying here for the foreseeable future, the fact that you’ve made yourself an enemy of both the nobles and the Guild is going to be an issue. Do you at least have any connections within the Academy?”

I shook my head in denial, feeling rather powerless.

“This one’s on you, Lyle,” the third head said from within the Jewel, his voice heated. “You went against Novem’s advice like a rebellious child, and now it’s come back to bite you. You’ll have to figure out how to handle the consequences on your own.”

“I don’t *really* recommend this,” Clara said with a sigh, “but the quickest way for you to get yourself permission to enter the dungeon is to cozy up to a noble. Just take me for instance—I don’t personally have the qualifications to enter the dungeon myself, so I rely on acquaintances to get me in. Unfortunately, though, I can’t introduce you to any of them, since most of them aren’t looking for any new party members. If you decide to go my route, your best bet would be to take on a request from one of the noble students enrolled in the Academy.”

“A request from a noble...?” I asked.

She nodded. “Exactly. Every student who attends the Academy has the qualifications to enter Aramthurst’s dungeon. So if they take a liking to you, they can hire you as guards and you’ll be able to enter too. Just...don’t pick the wrong person.”

“I assume if we do, we’ll get to experience the same sort of treatment you did today,” Novem said with a sigh.

“Correct,” Clara agreed. “That’s why I don’t recommend that particular method. There are some decent nobles around, but I definitely wouldn’t say they’re in the majority. I’ll help you out however I can, but in the end I’m just a freelance supporter. I doubt I’ll be of much use to you.”

With Clara's briefing over, I sank deeply into thought. *Is there anything we can do to resolve this situation?* I wondered. *My actions have really made it difficult for us to continue, and Clara's an adventurer who specializes in support—she doesn't fight, and her main role is to carry supplies and offer aid to her comrades by taking care of miscellaneous jobs. Plus, she's not affiliated with a specific party. She's a solo adventurer anyone can hire...*

"Hmm," I mumbled. "What exactly should we do, then?"

Chapter 44: Miranda Circry

The city of Aramthurst was defined by three things: the great well of knowledge that was its dungeon; its library, which was renowned throughout the continent; and its Academy, which was so prestigious that it had become a place where the sons and daughters of the nobility would gather from all the provinces of Banseim, including the king's own capital. This last quality was, of course, where Aramthurst had derived its title as the "Academic City."

Miranda Circry, one of the students of the Academy, was herself the eldest daughter of a noble of the court—Viscount Circry. She had wavy green hair which had been trimmed to just above her shoulders, and eyes that leaned more emerald than green, with a slight bluish hint to them. In addition, she had a face that was quite lovely to look at, and a figure that would charm even those of the same sex.

As a result, there were many male students who pined after her, though her popularity didn't come from her looks alone.

It was well known that House Circry had three daughters and no sons. This meant that the one who married the eldest daughter—which just so happened to be Miranda—would most likely find themselves serving as the head of a viscount house. As a result, many nobles who were not set to inherit their own titles approached her with ill intentions.

Now that her class had come to an end, Miranda calmly stood and began collecting her textbooks. Girls flocked to her without delay, scurrying across the lecture hall, which had been constructed with seats on an incline, as if they were spread across a wide flight of stairs.

"Hey, Miranda?" one girl asked. "What do you say to taking a slight detour on your way home?"

Another girl gasped in indignation. "No fair! Miranda, you should go shopping with me!"

“Yeah, I’ve got a better idea,” said another, more snarky girl. “You should hang out with *me*, Miranda.”

Miranda turned and shot all the girls an ambiguous smile. They were all nobles, just like her, but she turned them down regardless, citing the same reason she always did. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “My little sister is waiting for me at home and our servant quit, so I need to return and do the chores. I must hurry back.”

All three girls looked quite disappointed, but they accepted her answer and slunk off.

It was now time for the boys to gather. Just like the girls, they blatantly tried to appeal to her.

“How about I walk you home,” one of them asked. “You’ll need someone to carry the bags if you go shopping, right?”

“Hey, Miranda, pick me, pick me!” yelled another. “I can do it all for you, dear!”

“Pipe down, you,” snarked a third boy. “How about I take care of everything, Miranda? I’m an earl’s son, after—”

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine on my own,” Miranda interrupted, sending them the same enigmatic smile as she strode out of the lecture hall.

She was only a few steps down the corridor, however, when she noticed she’d forgotten something. *Oh no*, she thought with a sigh. *I have to go back.*

Miranda went right back down the path she’d come from, and as she approached the classroom door, she heard the sound of irritated voices from inside.

“What’s with that woman?!” snapped one of the girls who had approached Miranda with a smile. “And after I went out of my way to invite her along too.” She moaned in frustration. “If only House Circry didn’t have so much authority. *Then*, I wouldn’t have to talk to someone like her.”

One of the boys clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Why do you all have to constantly get in my way?” he demanded of someone else. “I need her at my

side if I want to rise up in the world! House Circry's a proper house with loads of appointments in government offices—if I married into them, even I'd be able to make a name for myself.”

From what Miranda could tell, it was only the six students who'd approached her that remained in the room.

“Oh, but you know what? I heard that girl's sister can't see a thing. They say it happened because of an accident or something, but I heard she was born blind. If that's true, there's probably a problem with her blood, right? You think she's really a noble?”

Miranda's teeth sunk into her lower lip as the topic shifted from her to her younger sister Shannon.

It's not like Shannon...did anything to deserve what's happened to her, she thought.

One of the young boys—a pompous guy with bangs he appeared to enjoy fiddling with—began to speak of her family as if he knew all about their circumstances. “Sounds like you're talking about Viscount Circry's third daughter,” he said. “Apparently, the whole reason he bought that house she and Miranda live in was to lock the younger girl away. She's a secret House Circry would love to bury.”

They weren't entirely wrong—Shannon had been driven out of Central because she got in the way of the noble House Circry's sterling image of wealth and power. Still, Miranda knew Shannon had been lucky to be born to such a house. It was doubtful she would have been able to live as long as she had if she'd been born to just any other family. Indeed, it was House Circry's power that ultimately kept Shannon alive—she'd have been thrown away the moment she was born had their family been a fraction poorer.

“You sound pretty knowledgeable,” one of the other students commented.

The pompous boy's voice got all puffed up. “Well, I did a bit of digging, you know,” he said. “My folks agreed with me that there's profit to be had in marrying into the Circrys. My apologies to the rest of you, but you'll all have to give up. I have it all planned out—”

“Don’t you screw with me!” another male voice snarled. “Where do you think I stand? If a third son like me wants to get back at my family, I’ve got to marry into power!”

It was abundantly clear, listening to them, why the three boys had approached her earlier. All three of them wanted to marry into House Circry. They were after her family name, and Miranda herself was merely a sideshow.

Well, I already knew that, Miranda thought, scoffing internally.

There were plenty of students at the Academy who weren’t from noble families, but were still relatively wealthy. Most of the time those men approached her, they did so with similar motives. The less ambitious ones—who didn’t think they’d be able to actually get the viscount title—asked to be introduced to her sister instead.

To them, taking a noble’s daughter as a wife was the same as buying themselves a place within the noble peerage, or spending a chunk of their funds to bring prestige to their house.

In any case, they’re harmless enough, Miranda thought. *Comparatively.*

The group of boys within the classroom were harmless compared to the men of the more affluent houses. Once, a merchant’s son had even talked of marrying her little sister as though it was a business negotiation.

Such things didn’t shock Miranda—she knew her place as a child of nobility, after all. And anyways, a noble was only a noble because of their house.

I can’t blame them for wanting to get in on that, she thought.

And since Miranda understood both her circumstances and those of the six in the lecture hall, she decided chastising them was a waste of time. She turned around and left, leaving her forgotten item unclaimed within the classroom.

Shannon Circry, the youngest daughter of the Circry family, was sitting at home awaiting her big sister’s return. She wore a red gown and bicep-length red gloves, and her long, wavy periwinkle hair cascaded over her shoulders. Each strand was beautifully maintained and gave off a lovely sheen. And her eyes...their normal amber shade had shifted to a glistening gold.

Safe in the knowledge that she was by herself in the empty house, Shannon began to hum a tune under her breath. With every beat, she carefully adjusted the position of the teapot sitting on her small bedroom table—but not with her hands. *They* continued to lay along the armrests of her wheelchair, though her fingers were in motion, tapping away to her song's rhythm. Meanwhile, the teapot floated up in the air on its own, tilting forward to pour her a cup of tea.

Once the cup was full, Shannon raised a finger to her lips. She stopped humming in favor of taking a deep breath. She tilted her head back, staring at the ceiling through sightless eyes as gold faded to amber. There was a strength in her movements that often went unnoticed by others, distracted as they were by the implied weakness of her slender physique and sickly pale skin.

Shannon let out a long, irritated sigh as she let her head fall forward once again. "Why must it be so tiring?" she muttered, reaching out a hand to probe for her teacup.

Once her fingers found their quarry, she wrapped them around the cup and brought it to her lips. Then, as she sipped at her tea, she recalled the events that had led her to this moment.

Three years had passed since Shannon, who'd been blind from the moment she was born, had an experience which had awakened a certain ability with her—the ability to perceive the flow of mana. No other human was able to see mana as she could.

"It's already been three years, huh...?" Shannon muttered in a low voice, the words stained with bitterness. "But it won't be long now. The time is coming, and soon."

It had been a long, frustrating experience, one that Shannon couldn't help but carry resentment for. The memory of the day it had happened hadn't left her either—it lingered in her mind clear as day. Back then, Shannon had been living on the Circry estate, back in Central...

Three years ago, Shannon had been spending her time as she always did—alone in her room. She'd been confined long ago by her family, who'd covered up the fact that she'd been born blind by telling the general public that she had

suffered a tragic accident that had caused her injuries so grievous that they'd had no other choice but to restrict her movements to their estate.

Cloistered away as Shannon had been, she'd had few people to spend time with. Her mother had passed away soon after her birth, and her second eldest sister, Doris, had resented Shannon for their mother's death. Doris's enmity was so strong, in fact, that whenever the two of them crossed paths Doris would fall into a fit of pique, as if the mere reminder of Shannon's existence was enough to enrage her.

Shannon could understand why Doris resented her so much—Doris had been quite young when their mother had died, still in the part of her life where she'd longed for her mother's warmth. And because of Shannon, their mother's kind soul, which had filled House Circry with light and harmony, had been extinguished. Shannon's father, who had been deeply in love with his wife, had devoted himself to the work of running their house ever since, eschewing the idea of ever taking another bride.

Shannon's eldest sister, Miranda, was the only person in her family that had ever treated her with kindness. To Shannon, Miranda was both a beloved elder sister who could do anything she set her mind to, and the mother she'd never had.

Eventually, Shannon had resigned herself to the fact that her life was going to be a never-ending passage of the same, unchanging days within her family's estate. But then...something peculiar had come to pass. Her father had told her, "Shannon, an important guest will be coming to visit our house soon. You are expected to attend the party as well."

An important guest is coming to visit House Circry? Shannon had thought, flustered.

Every other time their family had had guests over, Shannon had been forbidden from even leaving her room. *Why did father choose this one particular day to allow me to show my face to the world?* Shannon had wondered. She'd been embarrassed, but quite happy as well.

Wh-What do I do? Shannon had thought, a bit panicked. *I haven't been to any parties before. What if I end up making some sort of careless mistake? M-*

Maybe I shouldn't go after all...

While Shannon had been overjoyed that her family, who usually kept her at arm's reach, had acknowledged her existence even a little, the knowledge that this was an important visitor had sent her tumbling into inner turmoil. She'd asked Miranda what she should do and how she should act over and over again, desperate to ensure that she wouldn't slip up. At the same time, Shannon had studiously ignored Doris's deep irritation at her inclusion. Her second eldest sister hadn't been able to actually bring herself to contradict their father's decision anyways, so there had been no need to pay her any mind.

Finally, on the day of the event, Shannon had asked Miranda one more time, "Sis...are you really sure it's all right for me to attend the party?"

Miranda had nodded in return. "Of course it's all right, Shannon," she'd told her younger sister warmly. "And don't forget, I'll be there to help you out if you need me."

Shannon had taken her words to heart, shoring herself up to what was, to her at least, a very important day. After living her whole life in what was essentially a prison, locked away from the rest of society, this was the day Shannon would finally be able to greet the outside world.

Maybe they'll actually let me go outside after this, Shannon had thought as her wheelchair had been pushed to the great hall. *If that's the case, I won't be stuck spending all my time in the house or out on the grounds anymore.*

But Shannon had no more time to think over such things, as the time for the party had come. She could hear the pattering of footsteps as the servants of the Circry estate hastily rushed to and fro as she was pushed through a set of doors and into what she assumed was the great hall. Everything must have been prepared even more meticulously than normal, since even Shannon, who was blind, could sense the charge in the air.

"We offer you our most gracious welcome," Shannon had heard her father say. "Thank you for joining us here today."

"Oh, we should be thanking *you* for the invitation," one of their guests of honor had replied.

One of their other guests had chuckled. “Truly! We have no reason to turn down an invitation from House Circry, now do we? Our houses are practically family. Now Ceres, why don’t you introduce yourself?”

A third voice had cut through the air, then, feminine and light. “Greetings! I am Ceres Walt. It’s a pleasure to meet all of you. Especially you, Lord Circry—my parents have told me so much about you.”

They’re all here, Shannon had thought. So these are our guests for the day—Earl Walt, his wife, and his daughter, Ceres.

“What a proper lady you’ve raised there,” Shannon’s father had commented to Earl Walt, his tone gentle in a way Shannon had never before heard. “Though she *is* from House Walt, so maybe ‘princess’ would be a better title?”

I wish father would talk to me like that... Shannon had thought with an internal sigh. *But I’m not really sure I get what he means with the whole “princess” thing.*

As Shannon had pondered the implications of this statement, her two elder sisters had greeted Earl Walt, Lady Walt, and Ceres in turn. Finally, it had been Shannon’s time to shine.

She’d barely managed to stammer “I-It is such a pleasure to—” before Ceres cut in, interrupting her.

“Oh?” the other girl had said, voice mildly intrigued. “Who is this?”

Shannon had been able to hear Ceres’s dress shuffle across the floor as the other girl had come closer, until she’d abruptly felt that Ceres’s face was hovering right before her own. An unfamiliar scent had hung in the air beside her, cluing her in to the presence of a nearby stranger.

Wh-What’s going on?! Shannon had thought in a panic. She’d had no idea how to react—the whole thing had been so sudden.

Seeing Shannon’s befuddlement, Ceres had given an exasperated little huff. “Never mind,” she’d declared. “She’s just more garbage.”

“G-Garbage?” Shannon had stuttered, taken aback. She may have been shut away in the Circry estate for so long that she’d barely interacted with anyone

outside her family, but she was pretty sure that you weren't supposed to say something like that to someone's face. "Wh-What is that...supposed to mean...?"

And yet...no one had spoken up and defended her. In fact, everyone else had voiced their agreements with Ceres's words, and were now proceeding to shower Shannon in scorn.

Help... Someone... Shannon had pleaded internally, and a rush of relief had filled her when she sensed Miranda hurrying to her side.

"It's all right, Shannon," Miranda had whispered into her ear. "Let's just go."

Shannon had felt her wheelchair begin to roll forward as Miranda grabbed it and wheeled her from the great hall. But still...Shannon had heard what the voices behind her said as she was ushered away.

"Ceres," chided Earl Walt, "you know it's rude to treat others that way."

"Yes, father," Ceres had replied, her tone only mildly contrite. It was as if she'd thought of her words as only a slight bit of mischief and nothing more.

It hadn't helped that the adults surrounding her had simply forgiven her, laughing lightly.

"Well, what does it matter?" Doris said gleefully.

"Doris is right," Shannon's father agreed. "Ceres only stated a fact."

"But, Lord Circry," asked one of the Walts, "why did you allow someone like that to see the light of day in the first place?"

Forget sticking up for me! Shannon had thought, incredulous and deeply hurt. *My own family is joining in, agreeing with that girl's opinion to bring me down! But why...? Why?!*

Miranda had wheeled the chair faster and faster, trying to get Shannon away from the room as fast as she physically could. But in the end, she hadn't been able to save Shannon from hearing her father's last words: "Please accept my apologies. Shannon is such an embarrassment to our family."

I'm...an embarrassment? Shannon thought blankly. A searing pain had filled her chest, as if a gash had been carved straight into her heart. And as she'd

heard her father begin to laugh with the rest of the group in the hall, tears had broken free from her eyes and rolled down her face.

“Shannon? Are you okay?” Miranda had asked softly. Met with only silence, she’d sighed and continued, “I’ll take you back to your room.”

An indignant rage had filled Shannon’s heart then, and she’d forced the wheelchair to a stop. And then, without a moment’s hesitation, Shannon had climbed to her feet and began striding down the hall on her own. With every step, she had wept inconsolably.

“Shannon, stop! That’s dangerous!” Miranda had cried frantically, rushing forward to try and help her younger sister.

But Shannon had found herself unable to summon any gratitude for her sister’s actions. *It’s not like there’s anything actually preventing me from walking on my own two feet*, she’d thought, filled with irritation. *The only reason I ride around in that wheelchair is because they asked me to. It’s all just for show.*

As Shannon had stumbled back to her room, emotion after emotion had welled up in her chest—frustration, rage, sorrow. *Was I...just born to be abused like this?* she’d thought, overcome by grief. *To be treated like a laughingstock...? If that’s all I can expect from this life, then I shouldn’t have been born at all!*

Shannon honestly didn’t know how she’d managed to get back to her room after that. Perhaps it was just that her body had remembered the mansion’s layout. Regardless, by the time she knew it, she’d arrived. She’d strode through her door and slammed it behind her, then collapsed to her bed, burying her face in its covers.

Upon which time Shannon had cried, and cried, and cried. Until finally...she’d lifted her head.

“Wh-What is...that?”

The impenetrable darkness that Shannon had lived in her whole life had been suddenly pierced with glowing beads of red light. As she’d frantically twisted her head back and forth, eyes darting about the room, she’d realized the beads

were floating all around her. Whenever they'd hit a substance, they'd adhered to it briefly, giving Shannon a general understanding of her surroundings she'd never before come close to experiencing. It had been a terrifying experience for someone who'd known only black emptiness for their entire life.

"Wh-What is happening?!" Shannon had cried, voice raised in distress.

Why is my room suddenly filled with these mysterious particles of light?!

The beads of light had all shifted at once, as if reacting to Shannon's cries. They'd gone shooting toward the edges of the room, sticking to the furniture, the walls, and the floor. Suddenly, the form of her entire space had been revealed clearly before Shannon's astounded eyes.

"Huh...?" Shannon had breathed, slowly looking from side to side. Even though she'd never seen anything before, she had been able to tell that the room revealed by the light was the exact same one as the room she'd learned by touch.

Shannon had glanced down at her hands, where a bit of the red light was hovering. As she'd watched, it had twirled and changed, turning into a new yellowish color.

Is that...gold? she'd wondered as she'd stared down at her body, which was shrouded in that same color. That had been the first time Shannon had seen her physical form in all her life. She had been entranced by the sight of herself—moved down to her very core.

"This is amazing! Absolutely incredible!" she'd shouted, rocketing to her feet and beginning to stride back and forth around the room. She'd come to an abrupt stop before a small table, touching it lightly with a hesitant hand as if to make sure that it was really there.

To think, just a moment ago I was crying my eyes out! Shannon had thought, filled with joy.

That was when she'd decided to start experimenting. Soon, she'd discovered that the small red beads she could see would move in accordance to her will. She'd even found that she could scatter them into the air like blown dust, drawing spirals with them in space. Shannon had hurriedly stopped that,

though, when she'd felt a wind begin to pick up. She'd felt a little incredulous when the wind had stopped too.

"What could these little beads be?" Shannon had muttered to herself. By then, she'd developed a bit of an affection for them, since they so willingly obeyed her. "I— Ow! My eyes...really hurt."

Shannon had rubbed at her eyes then, trying to scrub away the pain that had gradually built up in her eye sockets. When she'd opened her eyes, the beads of light had vanished. She was in darkness once more. A frantic fear had filled her heart, and Shannon had strained, desperately trying to see them again. After a few moments, she could perceive them again, but her eyes ached fiercely.

"So," Shannon had said with a sigh of relief. "I can see, but it's very tiring on my eyes."

Feeling reassured by this realization, Shannon had made her way back to her bed, crawling under the covers. Once she'd been safely tucked away, she'd steadied her breath and brushed sweat off her forehead.

Guess I got a bit overexcited, she'd thought with a grin as she'd closed her eyes.

Just when Shannon was about to fall asleep, her eyes had shot back open. "That's right!" she'd exclaimed to herself. "I need to tell sis about this!"

I want to tell her about this as soon as possible! Shannon had thought. *It's such a random, joyous turn of events!*

But the party was still going on—Shannon could hear the boisterous voices still booming around within the great hall.

Guess I'll have to wait until it's completely over. And then, I'll apologize to sis for what happened, and tell her I can see her now. I'm sure she'll be happy after that.

Even though Shannon had been conflicted over the awful things her family and the Walts had said about her, she couldn't find it in her to close herself off to her eldest sister. Even if Shannon never opened up to anyone else, she would always trust Miranda.

With waiting the only choice left to her, Shannon had decided to close her eyes once more, and soon she had drifted off to sleep.

A short time had passed, and then Shannon had woken up once again. The mansion had grown considerably quieter, she'd noticed, though she had still been able to hear the voices of servants cleaning up the aftermath of the party.

This is as good a time as any! she'd thought gleefully, shooting out of bed as she channeled strength into her eyes. Shannon had made sure the red lights materialized fully, then burst from her room and gone tearing down the hall.

Strangely enough, she found that she could sense the location of the people outside of the corridor she was in, and even beyond the walls of her family's estate. Each person had their own specialized aura, with its own color and unique characteristics. Noticing this, Shannon had decided to search for the aura of her beloved sister. She scoured her eyes back and forth until—there! Something in Shannon had known that the aura before her was Miranda's, even if she'd never seen it before.

Shannon had headed toward her sister's aura, quickly realizing that it was located within a room by the great hall. She'd proceeded cautiously down the corridors of the Circry estate, taking care not to be seen. But unfortunately, Shannon had soon noticed that she was not the only one seeking to speak to Miranda—someone else was closing in on her sister as well.

Who is that? Shannon had wondered. *Could it be...father?*

Shannon had hidden in a neighboring room to eavesdrop, and as the man's footsteps drew near, she'd felt comfortable in thinking that it *was* her father. She could tell by the way his feet hit the floor, and the familiar sound of his gait.

Before long, her father had entered the room where her sister was, but Shannon had unfortunately found that she couldn't hear a thing. She'd concentrated, straining to hear the sound of their voices, and to her shock some of the red beads around her had started quivering, their vibrations projecting her family's discussion in the next room straight to her ears.

This is insane! Shannon had thought, allowing herself a few joyful hops. *How talented am I?!*

But then...she'd heard what they were saying. And the truth of it was a cruel, cruel thing.

"I thought that little icebreaker might prove useful in our marriage discussions, but unfortunately they declined our proposal," Shannon had heard her father say. His tone had been cold and remote, the polar opposite of how he'd spoken to Ceres. "It looks like the rumors we heard about their son being disinherited were true."

"Yes, father, I am aware," Miranda had replied, her voice dark and depressed. "But did you really have to use Shannon in such a wa—?"

Her father had cut Miranda off with a sharp laugh. "Indeed, I did. Such a thing is necessary if we hoped to approach House Walt as they are now. They're simply too dangerous for us to do otherwise. Still, that Ceres girl...she's more impressive than I ever could have imagined. I was surprised to learn she's the same age as Shannon."

"Father," Miranda had said, voice sharp and pleading. "Please don't be so mean to Shannon..."

He'd scoffed. "You know perfectly well what was going to happen today, Miranda. You should stop prattling on about it and start worrying over what else you can do to support House Circry."

Their conversation hadn't ended there, but Shannon had been too dumbfounded to process the rest of their words.

"So from the very start...I was just there to be laughed at? And sis was in on it?"

The power in Shannon's eyes had swelled, light gleaming. Tears had begun to flood down her face, but she kept her sobs restrained, her voice utterly quiet.

When Shannon had come back to herself, the first thing she'd heard was her father's voice, laying out her future in sharp terms.

"There's no reason to keep her here at the estate," he had said. "We'll go ahead and send her to Aramthurst to get an education. I'll assign her a caretaker who knows her circumstances, so Miranda...just forget about her."

I-I'm to be driven from the estate? They're just going to throw me away?!

Shannon had begun to laugh, her voice wild. "Aha...ha ha ha ha! Goddesses, I was such an idiot. To think I was even the least bit excited over that party! And this whole time father was... He was planning on driving me out of the estate?"

"I can't do that, father!" Miranda had declared, her voice echoing over to Shannon from the other room.

Shannon had fallen silent, listening.

"I refuse to accept your decision!" Miranda had continued. "If you're going to insist on sending her away, I'm going to Aramthurst too! I'll stay by Shannon's side forever!"

"Do what you want," her father had replied in a dead tone. "The matter will be resolved once Doris finds a groom. I had my hopes on you but...you've proved a disappointment."

They were words no daughter should ever hear from her father.

Shannon had watched through a crack in the door as Miranda had stormed from the room. She'd smiled through her tears. "What's gotten into you, sis?" she'd asked softly. "You knew everything already. You knew my only purpose was to be the butt of their joke. And you knew that I trusted you! You're the only person I've ever trusted!"

Shannon had buried her head in her hands, trying to rub away her tears. But alas, they had been an unending stream. Despite her efforts, they'd continued to dribble to the floor.

Right then and there, Shannon had made a vow to herself. "Very well," she'd murmured, eyes on her sister's retreating back. "I'll never forgive you, *any* of you! Not father, not Doris, not Miranda, and absolutely *not* that girl, Ceres! I'll get back at every single one of you, and show everyone what happens to those who make a fool out of me!"

And so the night had ended with Shannon seething in her anger, her fists clenched as she planned her vengeance toward all of them. Still, the main focus of her rage focused on a singular person—Ceres.

Back in the present day, Miranda had finished her shopping in the market district. Her arms were wrapped firmly around a large brown bag full of groceries—it was primarily made up of food items, enough to provide a handful of meals for her and Shannon.

Back in Central, she'd never had to return home with heavy bags in hand. In Aramthurst, however, she'd done it more than a few times. She'd become pretty accustomed to shopping in the market at this point, and was well acquainted with the middle-aged men and women who ran the market stalls. They'd even throw in some freebies for her now and then.

But Miranda wasn't thinking about the market or shopping at the moment—she was thinking of her younger sister. She let out a long, deep sigh. "I really need to find her a new caretaker," she said softly. "But..." she trailed off, finding herself rather reluctant about the idea.

Usually, Miranda would hire someone to take care of most of the shopping and housework without even blinking. It wasn't as if she'd been sent to Aramthurst without the funds—her family had made sure of that. The truth was...she'd hired several caretakers already, and every single one of them had quit almost immediately.

I don't think our terms are that bad, Miranda thought, a squiggle appearing between her brows. *But even offering competitive wages doesn't seem to help.*

Working hours, time off, and pay—however you looked at it, Miranda was offering better terms than any of the other houses. And there were plenty of other houses about—many youths flocked to Aramthurst to attend the Academy, and many apartments had been erected around the city to house them.

The most affluent nobles lived in houses the city had prepared, with amenities like yards and greenery. Some of these homes were even bought by the nobility instead of rented out. This was rare, though, and most of them would change hands after a few years, beyond the few properties which noble families kept on permanent hold.

The house Miranda and Shannon lived in had been purchased by House

Circry. Despite this, their lives had not been easy since they moved to Aramthurst. Miranda had had no other choice but to care for her sister on top of fulfilling all her requirements as a student of the Academy. And that wasn't even mentioning all the housework she'd been doing.

And yet, no matter how hard Miranda worked, it seemed as if something more would always be left undone, just outside her abilities.

Should I send a letter home, asking to borrow one of the servants from the estate...? Miranda thought, almost giving in to temptation. *But... No, I can't rely on father.*

Miranda shook her head, chastising herself for her own naivete as she picked up her pace. The sun's angle was a bit low for her liking, and the light was beginning to mellow and bleed into the overcast gloom of early evening.

I took too long shopping, Miranda thought, wincing internally. *I've got to get back home. Shannon's waiting for me.*

As she strode down the road, Miranda's eyes landed on a young man. He had bright-blue eyes, blue hair that had been styled into spikes, and a rather youthful face. He looked like his transition from boy to young man had only just recently settled into place, though he appeared to be a year or two younger than she was. He had a saber at his hip, a coat tucked under one of his arms, and the collar of his shirt pulled open wide. There was...something about him that just hit Miranda right in the sternum.

O-Oh, Miranda thought, startled. *He's looking right at me. But, come to think of it, there are some boys at the Academy of a similar type.*

Miranda's eyes fell to the blue gemstone glistening on his chest, embedded into a silver pendant. *Is that a Gem?* she wondered, intrigued. *That's quite a rare thing to have in this day and age. Perhaps he's an adventurer, then?*

Still, Miranda didn't have time to dwell on the young man's appearance. She tried to slip past him, idly noting his very casual outfit and comfortable leather boots.

If he just relaxed a bit, he'd probably come off as quite the earnest guy, Miranda thought.

Or at least, that's what she thought until the young man planted a hand onto the wall in front of Miranda's face, blocking her path.

"Wh-What are you doing...?" Miranda asked weakly.

"I'd just like to know where you are going, madame," the man replied.

Miranda stared at him blankly, lost in a sea of confusion. *He's obviously nervous*, she thought, struggling to piece together what was happening. *His eyes are wandering all over the place, and he's even sweating! What an awkward man.*

Finally, she replied, "Well, umm...I just so happen to be on my way home..."

"A-Are you now?" the boy stammered in reply.

Uh, what is he even trying to do...? Miranda thought in exasperation. She didn't feel that she was in any danger though—judging by the young man's tense expression, he was just as bothered by their mess of an interaction as Miranda was.

"Do you, uh, need something?" Miranda asked slowly.

The boy's eyes dropped to the ground. "I...well, um, yes," he muttered, his voice barely audible. "Actually, um...I'm hitting on you."

Miranda was momentarily stunned into silence, while the young man seemed to turn to stone. They stood there frozen like that, staring at each other in hopeless mortification.

What is going on here?! Miranda thought, mind spinning as she continued to stare at him. He's hitting on me? Is this really how such things are supposed to be done...?

It wasn't as if she'd never been catcalled before, but Miranda had never experienced anything quite like *this*.

The young man finally broke their stalemate by sighing and lowering his hand from the wall and moved to stand in front of her instead. Miranda had a feeling he'd grown tired of standing in such an awkward position. She thought about trying to dodge around him again, but was distracted by the way he'd grasp at the pendant on his chest, rolling it and gripping it tightly in his hand.

He's completely lost his composure, Miranda thought, a slight trickle of amusement lighting up in her.

Finally he opened his mouth and asked, "Did it, um, work? My hitting on you, I mean." One look at her face and he held up a hand. "No, don't tell me—I already know it didn't. Honestly, I'm...I'm so sorry."

He...rejected himself before I got the chance. Miranda's eyebrows rose. *I can't just leave him be—I've got to give him some sort of advice.*

This was a very Miranda-like thing to think—looking after people was in her nature, and this young man's technique was just too terrible to ignore.

Truly, I feel a little bad for him, Miranda admitted to herself.

"To be clear..." she said slowly, "you were trying to pick me up, right? In that case, you really should have said what sort of activity you wanted to do with me. Like, did you want to have tea, or to go somewhere else and do something fun? There are quite a number of options, but you didn't ask me to do anything specific, so I find myself unsure of your true intentions."

The young man's face became thoughtful for a moment. "In that case, I'd prefer to go get some tea."

"Yes, there you go—that sounds lovely!" Miranda replied, smiling slightly. "Tea it is then. Next time you should start with that."

Wait... Miranda thought, too late to stop the words from leaving her mouth. *That sounded a little too like I was inviting him out, instead of rejecting him! And why am I teaching an unknown man the basics of pick-up artistry anyway...?*

But despite her misgivings, Miranda had noticed that their conversation was finally getting somewhere. She waited, curious to hear the man's response.

"Why don't I start over, then?" he asked. "Would you like to join me for some tea?"

"Sorry," Miranda replied, "I'm busy, so tea is a no-go for me."

The man nodded, not seeming to realize she'd turned him down. "Oh, okay. Then why don't we go and get a meal together? It can be my treat."

“I’ll have to decline that offer as well,” Miranda said weakly. “I’m sorry, maybe I wasn’t clear—my previous response was meant as a rejection of you, *not* the tea.”

“Oh, I see!” the man said, realization hitting him. “You said no tea, so I thought it was that specific activity that was the problem!”

Usually, Miranda would have just pasted a smile on her face and soundly turned the young man down, and that would have been the end of it. But today, for some reason she didn’t fully understand, she was getting deeply engrossed in a conversation instead. A hint of amusement trickled through Miranda’s chest.

This young man, he’s different from all the other boys I’ve met so far. He’s...kind of interesting.

A flicker of a smile ran across Miranda’s face. “You’re kind of a funny guy,” she told him.

“You really think so?” he asked, scratching awkwardly at his hair.

Miranda opened her mouth to reply, but froze when a familiar face appeared from around the street corner. It was a somewhat narcissistic boy she knew from the Academy.

The boy’s eyes were pointed downward toward the cobbled street as he fiddled with his long bangs, but when he glanced up and saw Miranda and the young man, his eyes went wide.

“Hold it right there!” he cried, racing toward them.

Moments later, Miranda watched, mouth slightly agape, as the boy hammered his fist directly into the face of the young man who’d been trying to hit on her.

That boy doesn’t understand what’s happening here at all! Miranda thought indignantly, placing her groceries on the ground in a rush. The young man had been knocked entirely off his feet, and she hurried to his side, wrapping her arms around him to hold him steady.

It looks like he took the blow to his cheek, Miranda thought, eyes running over

him. *He doesn't seem to be particularly injured though.*

"Are you okay?" Miranda asked the man.

But alas, the narcissistic boy from school wasn't interested in giving the young man time to speak. He strode up to the pair of them, grinning at Miranda.

"Looks like I found you in a tough spot there! Why don't you let me walk you home?"

The boy extended his hand to Miranda, but she knocked it aside.

"I guess I must thank you for attempting to help me, but really, what were you *thinking*?! How could you just suddenly punch someone like that? This young man is not at all the sort of person who'd have done me harm."

"I mean, no, clearly not, but, umm..." the boy trailed off, a stupid look on his face. "Hey, Miranda, wait!"

Miranda carefully helped the young man to his feet, studiously ignoring the panicking Academy boy. "You look all right," she said to the young man, peering at his injury, "but a little treatment certainly wouldn't hurt. Follow me—I'll take care of it at my house."

"H-Huh?" the two males stammered, eyes wide.

Chapter 45: The Orphic Eyes of House Walt

A few days after my party settled into the Academic City of Aramthurst, I found myself at the inn, scanning through the various leaflets from private schools and training halls I'd gathered, trying to see if there was anything that caught my eye. Quite a few of them were geared directly toward those who'd just arrived in Aramthurst.

As I flipped through the leaflets one by one, I muttered their marketing copy aloud. "Beckens's Sword Coaching, huh? 'Come master the blade with us, and you can be a reliable vanguard too!'"

The third head scoffed. "Think about it, Lyle," he snarked. "Will sword techniques picked up at a training hall really be practical in an all-out fight?"

I gave a thoughtful little hum, scanning farther down the leaflet's text. "It says here that he's an adventurer with more than ten years' experience. Should that count for—?"

"You've already learned swordsmanship!" the fifth head cut in, rolling his eyes. "You're pretty good at it too. Next."

I picked up the next pamphlet. "This one's for Archmage Clarise's Water Magic Training. 'Come, let us stare into the magical abyss together! With my help, you can learn all the skills you need to become the main source of firepower for any party!'"

The sixth head chuckled. "You're gonna become the main source of a party's firepower using water magic? I mean, I get what they're trying to say, but...next!"

I glanced over the next one. "'Any good party needs a scout, and I can teach you the skills.' It's just signed 'Scoutmaster.'"

"The guy just seriously called himself 'Scoutmaster'?" the second head said with a wince. "I mean, scouts are necessary, don't get me wrong..."

"That's bad enough," the seventh head said disinterestedly, "but Lyle's also

the party leader. He can't just leave to go out and do recon."

This continued until I'd read through all of the pamphlets. Finally, the fourth head concluded, "None of these seem to be quite what we're looking for. As I expected, you'll have to go out there and check out the halls for yourself. Oh, but Lyle—keep those papers. You can reuse them for something else if they don't have anything written on the back."

I followed his orders, stacking the pamphlets on a bedside table. Then I flopped down on my bed. The girls had all gone out looking for shops, trying to pin down the places we'd need to go to buy necessities. It made sense to get to know the area, as we were planning on being in Aramthurst for a good amount of time. Unfortunately, I had been excluded from this quest, and was now...alone.

"I'm bored..." I moaned.

"Then how about you do what Clara told you to?" the second head asked pointedly. "Go to the Guild and take some requests."

Some requests, huh? I thought.

From what Clara had said, in Aramthurst, minor jobs typically came from Academy students. If we could figure out which requests came from the children of nobles, we'd be able to curry the favor we needed to get permission to enter the dungeon. It wasn't that non-noble students couldn't access the dungeon—they could. It was just that there was a good chance that the Academy or Guild would get in our way if we didn't have the backing of the nobility specifically.

Say we ended up getting close to the son of a merchant, and said son went and asked the Guild for permission to enter the dungeon with us in his party. In such a situation, Clara had warned us that the Guild might refuse and simply offer a recommendation of another team of adventurers to accompany the merchant's son. This was standard practice, as the Academy considered its students precious, and the Guild staff had been trained to recommend the most trustworthy and accomplished parties possible in order to keep them safe. Thus, even though we'd befriended an Academy student, we'd be back to square one—being a party without accomplishments to speak of within the city,

and one that had far too few party members to boot.

Recruiting new members for our party would likely go the same way if we didn't have noble backing. After all, the Guild despised us now, and according to Clara, that meant they'd get into our way at every turn. I wasn't too surprised at this information, honestly, as the receptionists had really rubbed me the wrong way.

But if we did have noble backing...well, that'd be a whole different story.

The Academy tended to take a step back when it came to nobles, and the Guild was forbidden to intervene unless it was expressly called for. Thus, everything the nobles said essentially became law, and no one could complain. No one wanted the trouble of dealing with an angry noble—they were an absolute pain to handle. I knew this was true, but...as a former noble, it left me feeling a bit conflicted.

Still, the primary feeling I felt was boredom. I sat up, deciding to follow the second head's advice and drop by the Guild.

Aramthurst's Guild was located near the city wall, close to the gate we'd need to pass through to venture outside. Despite that, though, it was hard to say it was in a prime location. Aramthurst was a large place, and given its nature, there were always plenty of people coming and going, churning up clouds of sand as they carted in various goods and supplies. The villages nearby the city would bring in food to sell at the market, while materials and processed goods obtained in the city would be carted around to their new owners. The majority of these goods were carried by horses and oxen, which meant that the stench hanging around the area was pretty bad too.

Adventurers were taking care of the area's cleanup as I arrived—most likely ones who didn't yet have the proper equipment to take on bigger jobs.

They probably took the job from the Guild, I thought, watching as several magicians used magic so weak it barely classified as a spell to conjure up some water to wash off the street.

"That water's going to dry up right away in this heat..." I muttered under my

breath, wincing as I watched it do just that. It left behind a muggy, unpleasant atmosphere. I made the prudent decision to hurry past and into the doors of the Guild.

There were hardly any adventurers inside, as it had just passed noon. The lack of a crowd made it easy to find the board where the requests were posted, which I headed to right away. There were a couple people hanging around the area, there for the same reason as I was. Ignoring them, I began reading over the contents of the requests. What I found made me sigh deeply.

Most of the jobs on the board had to do with the Academy, and the requesters primarily were members of the student body. There were some requests that had been put in by professors as well, but those were treasured enough to be kept on an entirely separate board from the one I was currently surveying. According to Clara, anyone who completed one of the professors' requests would be thought of as someone who had done a favor for the Academy.

There was only one problem—the contents of the professors' requests were said to be absolutely terrible.

Out of curiosity, I peered over at one. All it took was a glance to make my entire face go stiff. "This guy wants the entire intact skeleton of a wyvern?" I demanded. "And this guy wants...a *fresh* fire dragon's stomach? That's impossible!"

The most doable request I could see was one that required retrieving the Demonic Stone of the boss monster on Aramthurst's dungeon's fortieth floor. I couldn't enter the dungeon, though, so that job was lost on me.

"The professors at the Academy must be crazy," the third head said, just as surprised as I was. "What does he even mean by 'fresh stomach' anyways? Do you think they want you to capture the thing alive?"

"I've never fought a dragon before," the seventh head admitted in a strained voice, "but I've heard there used to be some in Walt territory."

"There were," the second head said like it was nothing. "I never got the chance to fight any either, though." If I wasn't mistaken, there was some disappointment in the second head's voice. I couldn't relate. "My old man beat

up a really big dragon, and it actually turned out to be the boss of all the others in the area. After that they all just stopped appearing.”

Dragons were really powerful monsters—it was said that meeting one was a recipe for certain death. It seemed that after Basil Walt, the founder of my house, had defeated the massive land dragon I’d seen in his memories, none of my other ancestors had had the chance to fight one of them in battle. The founder hadn’t fought one of the stronger types of dragons either—land dragons were known for lacking the ability to fly, making them relatively easy to beat compared to their counterparts.

The sixth head let out a long sigh. “Dragons, eh?” he asked, sounding just as disappointed as the rest of my ancestors. “I always wanted to have a go at one, but none of them ever showed up back at home. Why do you reckon that is? I mean, I know it’d be a mess if they *did* show up, but...you know.”

He’s gotta be bluffing, right? I thought with a snort. *There’s no way he’s serious.*

Regardless, I decided I was better off not knowing.

It wasn’t like I was planning to actually take on any jobs that required hunting dragons, anyway.

With this thought in mind, I turned back to the board in front of me, scanning over the requests the Academy students had posted once more. Unfortunately, I quickly realized that none of them would be able to give me the credibility I needed to get into the dungeon.

“‘Clean my room’?” I read incredulously. “‘Do this course for me’? Are these kids serious...?”

There was even a request to “Look into this girl I like” mixed in there as well. Exasperation filled me. Every single request on that board was odd, and the money promised for completing them was so minuscule the job’s were hardly worth contemplating. On top of that, there was no way to know if a job was posted by a noble or not.

I was still staring at the forms, lost in thought, when the third head said, “Wait, hold on a minute. Didn’t we agree to not get involved with any nobles

while we were in Aramthurst? Why've we suddenly completely changed our policy? I truly cannot recommend sticking your head into any more trouble, Lyle."

I sighed. *I'm not sticking my head into trouble because I want to. This is just more efficient.*

I rolled the Jewel between my fingertips, but the third head didn't take the hint to fall silent. He just kept going on and on, saying, "Why don't you just head out and do a bit of hard labor? Work like that'd suit a young man like you just fine. Honestly, there's no reason you need to fixate on the dungeon so hard, is there?"

Why is he so out for my blood today? I thought, irritated. Normally I reserved rolling the Jewel to circumstances where I needed my ancestors to immediately do something, or to be completely quiet for some reason. And yet... *He's not listening to my signals with the Jewel at all. In fact, he sounds amused at how frustrated I'm becoming with him!*

"That bad habit of yours strikes again, I see," the fourth head replied, aghast at his father's words. "Lyle's got it right when it comes to focusing on how efficiently he's earning funds. If he can just get into that dungeon, his earnings will be significantly higher than anything he can earn this way. I suggest—"

The doors to the Guild violently burst open, cutting off the fourth head in his tracks. I glanced over at the newcomer, who seemed to be a student from the Academy. He had long hair and was wearing a white shirt, skinny black pants, and leather shoes that seemed a tad dirty. The crease on his brow seemed to indicate that he was very conscious of this fact, but I was more distracted by the white handkerchief that was wrapped around his face, covering his mouth.

I wasn't the only one staring at the man—his rather intense entrance had garnered the attention of the Guild staff and the other adventurers in the building as well.

Faced with a room of staring eyes, the man opened his mouth and said irritably, "It *reeks* in here."

This rather odd sentence seemed to unfreeze the room, and a Guild receptionist hurried over to the student. "How can I help you today, sir?" the

receptionist asked, putting his hands together in a pleading motion, as if he was begging something of a very important client.

“Obviously,” the man snapped back. “That goes without saying. Why would I come here if it wasn’t to make a request? Go find me an adventurer at once.”

This guy’s gotta be a noble, I thought, not a doubt in my mind on the subject. This supposition was further confirmed when my gaze fell on an expensive-looking ring on the man’s finger, which seemed to bear the crest of some family or another.

The receptionist’s face blanched at this overbearing show of disdain. “I-If you want to make a request, you must fill out the necessary paperwork,” he stammered. “We will find an adventurer that meets your criteria by tomorrow, so please—”

“What do you mean you can’t complete my request immediately?!” the man shouted, clearly not at all satisfied with this explanation. “Don’t you know I’m an earl’s—?”

There we go, I thought, laughing internally. *The second his mood took a turn for the worse, he had to go boasting about his proud lineage and whatnot.*

Meanwhile, the receptionist had raised his clasped hands to his forehead, practically begging the man for forgiveness as he lowered his head toward the floor.

“He’s the son of a noble?” the second head said, horrified. “What’s gotten into the young’uns these days?”

The third head snorted. “It doesn’t matter the era—you’ll always find your share of idiots. He’s interesting enough to watch, though.”

“He’s so disgusting, he’s entered the realm of pure comedy,” the fourth head muttered, aghast.

The fifth head nodded. “People really need to learn to not just focus on educating their eldest sons. They’ve got to work on their other children too.”

The sixth head rolled his eyes. “*You* didn’t even focus on your eldest! I don’t remember you doing jack for me. But, still...this is terrible!”

“I agree,” the seventh head chimed in. “What did this bloke even come to the Guild for?”

I was also quite curious to hear what sort of request had brought this arrogant noble son to the Guild. *If it's something I can pull off...I want to take the job.*

But just as I had this thought, the man spat out an absolutely outrageous request. It was so beyond the pale that even the receptionist had to make sure he hadn't misheard.

“H-Huh?! S-So you're saying you want someone to play the part of a scoundrel and terrorize the girl you like?”

“Did I not just say that?” the man said in a dismissive tone. He didn't seem to have the least bit of shame about the matter. “That's exactly what I want. It's a job that's plenty suitable for any of these *filthy* adventurers, don't you think? I just need one of them to take on a sloppy appearance and have them hit on her or something. She's a total icebox with anyone who acts like that toward her. And once they've pestered her repeatedly for a bit and things start to get a bit too rough, I can appear on the scene!” The young man raised his eyebrows expectantly. “How does that sound?”

The receptionist stared at the man blankly for a moment, unsure of how to reply. Finally, he managed, “Th-That sounds wonderful. I-I'll go and get the papers ready, and—”

“I'm telling you I don't have the time for that!” the man snapped. “It needs to be done within the day!”

The guy's attitude is absolutely abysmal, I thought. The adventurers standing around me clearly agreed, as I could hear them clicking their tongues in disgust. *However...*

I took a few steps forward, drawing up in front of the man. In my head, my ancestors began to howl.

“H-Hey! *Lyle!*” the second head shrieked. “Don't tell me you actually plan on taking that job! Stop right there—*absolutely* not. My instincts are tingling! There's no way that job will actually work out!”

“Lyle, people like him—they’re the sort you should take a step back and laugh at,” the third head chided me. “Once you get close to people like that, they quickly stop being funny anymore.”

“Why are you in such a rush to take this job?” the fourth head demanded, sighing. “You should quit while you’re still ahead.”

The fifth head nodded, in full agreement. “He’s right. Lyle, don’t get involved. Nothing good will come of it.”

The sixth head was of a similar opinion. “I agree. Lyle, just be a good kid and listen to your elders.”

At this point, I’d normally listen to my ancestors and stand down and walk away from the whole situation. But now, the thought of doing so filled me with disgust. *Exactly what issue do they think there is going to be?* I thought, irritated. *As long as I succeed, everything will be just fine.*

“Lyle, come on! Just listen to us!” the second head called out. I ignored him, and his voice got a little sulky as he continued, “You know, you’ve been a really poor listener recently!”

“Come to think of it,” the fifth head muttered, “he might be entering *that phase...*”

The third head hummed thoughtfully. “I guess everyone has to go through it,” he said. “Just don’t ask me to take responsibility for what happens, Lyle—that’s all up to you.”

What are they so worried about? I thought, annoyed. *At least from what I’ve heard so far, I shouldn’t have any problems fulfilling this request.*

It was quite simple, really. All I had to do was hit on someone and fail, and act a bit mean. It was such an easy job that practically anyone could do it. And, anyway, failure came quite easily to me.

“Umm, sir...?” I said, catching the Academy student’s attention. “How about you hire me?”

Somehow or another, I’d found myself being taken home by Miranda Circry—the girl I’d been attempting to hit on. Once she’d ushered me inside and gotten

me situated at her dining table, she'd gone off and retrieved a medical kit, and now she was examining what there was of my wounds.

She quickly concluded that I was not particularly injured after a quick inspection of my cheek and the inside of my mouth, but she was still kind enough to cast a bit of healing magic on me. She even smeared a bit of ointment on the spot I'd gotten hit. It left my skin feeling oddly tingly.

"Th-Thank you very much," I said, flushing at her thoroughness.

Back when the Academy student had swung at me, I'd lurched backward—there was no way I'd sustained any real injury. I wasn't qualified to receive such careful treatment in the first place, let alone from her.

But regardless, she still looked at me with a guilty look in her eyes. "You're welcome," she told me, voice ringing with sincerity. "Still, I feel bad for letting an injured person carry my things."

That brown bag of ingredients she was carrying was pretty heavy... I thought, wincing in remembrance. But to be fair, I was the one who insisted on carrying it—I had to atone for my sins somehow.

This thought brought my mind back to the true culprit behind the situation I was currently in—the pompous noble whose request I'd taken. The only reason I'd tried to hit on Miranda was because of him.

Not to mention...how did me playing the villain end up like this? Seriously...

I could hear the third head chuckling from inside the Jewel. "Why does he succeed only when he has to fail?" he asked the others, tone amused.

Maybe I should have taken offense at that, but instead I found myself thinking, *Actually...why did I succeed?!*

I must have made a strange face, because Miranda's eyes flickered over me in genuine concern. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Are you in pain?"

"N-No, it's nothing," I mumbled.

My gaze dropped to the table in front of me, which looked like it was typically only used for meals, but now had been heaped high with medical supplies. There was even a teapot sitting a short distance away, which was filled with

piping-hot tea Miranda had prepared for my sake.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Miranda replied softly, sending me a gentle smile.

That said, she reached out and scooped up a steaming teacup, which she cradled gingerly in both hands before bringing it to her lips.

Looking at her over the rim, I couldn’t help but think she seemed sincerely relieved that I was all right. Seeing that look on her face only made me feel even more guilty.

She’s such a kind person, I thought, abashed. *And yet I’m still deceiving her.* My chest ached.

“Hey,” she said suddenly. “I know I told you I didn’t have time to go out with you today, but would you care to have some tea with me at a later date?”

“Y-You...want to have tea?!” I stammered, taken aback. “With *me*?!”

Miranda shot me an exasperated look. “What are you acting so surprised about? Wasn’t that exactly what you were hoping for?”

She has a point... I thought, wincing. *To be honest, though, I was kind of hoping she’d hate me. At least then that smug Academy student would have been justified in hitting me.*

Not that I could tell Miranda that. How could I possibly tell her, “Actually, the whole reason I hit on you was so that you’d shoot me down”?

I was distracted by these musings by a sound coming from a doorway that led into the dining room. I turned, catching sight of a young girl sitting in a wheelchair. She hadn’t come entirely through the door yet, pausing in favor of cautiously peeking her head in.

“Sis?” she asked tentatively, one hand still clutched around the doorknob, “Do we have a visitor?”

From within the Jewel, I heard the fifth, sixth, and seventh heads make choked sounds. I didn’t pay them any mind though, keeping my attention on Miranda instead as she stood from her spot at the table and headed to the girl’s side.

“Sorry about that, Shannon. This man is my guest. He’s...” she paused and

turned to me, a helpless look in her eyes. “Umm, sorry, what was your name again?”

Come to think of it, I never did introduce myself, I thought.

“My name’s Lyle. Lyle Walt.”

Miranda looked surprised there for a second, I thought as I watched her circle around her sister’s wheelchair. My thoughts, however, were focused on something else. What just happened with that Shannon girl’s—

“Lyle, is it?” asked the girl in the wheelchair, cutting my thoughts short. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name’s Shannon. As I’m sure you can, um, see...my eyes are a bit wanting.”

Sadness overcame Miranda’s face as she looked down at her sister. “It was an accident, but what’s done is done,” she said softly. “Lyle, I’m going to have to tend to Shannon for a bit. Would you mind waiting here?”

I nodded my assent, and Miranda wheeled Shannon from the room, the two of them vanishing down the hall.

“Was it just me,” I asked my ancestors, reflecting on what I’d just seen, “or did the eyes of that girl in the wheelchair glow for a second?”

It had only been for the briefest of moments, right after I’d stated my last name, but I could have sworn that Shannon’s amber eyes had let off a golden glimmer and abruptly shifted toward my face.

Nah, I thought as soon as I’d stated my assumption aloud. I must have been seeing things.

But then three of my ancestors spoke up, voicing the contrary.

“It was just for a moment, but I saw it too,” the second head agreed.

“Me too,” the third head affirmed. “I’m not even sure she’s *actually* blind—that moment her eyes glowed, she was definitely looking at your face.”

“She appeared to have a reaction to hearing that your last name was Walt,” the fourth head said thoughtfully. “Could the girls be distant relatives of ours, perhaps?”

“You’re not too far off,” the fifth head cut in. “I thought that Miranda girl’s last name sounded familiar, but I only remembered why when I saw her sister. My daughter was married off to a member of the Circry family, and Shannon resembles her quite closely.”

“House Circry, huh?” the sixth head said thoughtfully. “Back in my time, they were viscounts and members of the imperial court. They had quite a number of their people installed in high-up positions within the government as well.”

“They were in a similar position in my era,” the seventh head agreed. “We had quite a close relationship with House Circry, since they were the house my aunt married into. In which case...Lyle, that Miranda girl just might have become your wife.”

I blinked, speechless. *Uh, that came out of nowhere*, I thought. *How did he come to that conclusion...?*

Honestly, though, I was less interested in that than the fact that, once upon a time, a member of House Walt had married into House Circry.

So she was the fifth head’s daughter, the sixth head’s little sister, and the seventh head’s aunt... I calculated.

“My daughter had those eyes too,” the fifth head said, his tone oddly grave, as if he spoke of something with great importance. “We used to call them orphic eyes—eyes that can perceive things beyond a human’s ability to comprehend. If, like my daughter, that Circry girl possesses a set of orphic eyes, that means she can perceive mana.”

The third head let out a thoughtful hum. “What a name...” he murmured. “Do you think that’s why they glowed, then?”

Before the fifth head could answer, the sixth head spoke up, his voice weak. “Lyle...” he mumbled, clearly feeling terribly hesitant to say anything further. “Those eyes of hers...you might have to...have to...” He took a deep breath, and then, as if he felt he had no other choice, he spat out, “You might have to crush them.”

Shock barreled through me. *I never expected the sixth head to say something like that*, I thought, bewildered. The sixth head might have been a bit of an

irresponsible person, but I'd always thought he had an air of kindness to him.
That's such a cruel thing to do to such a young girl...

Miranda returned soon after that, so I didn't have a chance to press the sixth head for more information. Still, his words weighed upon my mind.

I've got to get on my way so that I can get him to tell me what else he knows, I decided.

With that goal in mind, I quickly promised Miranda that I'd meet up with her again soon, and left the Circry residence.

Shortly after Lyle's departure, Shannon sat in the kitchen, eyes following her sister's movements as she began to prepare dinner. Despite the fact that the young man had already left, Shannon was feeling decidedly unamused.

"You seem happy, sis," Shannon commented idly, her hands clenching on the arms of her wheelchair.

"D-Do you think so?" Miranda stammered, dress swishing as she spun to face Shannon. "But...Shannon, you don't like the Walt family, do you? I never thought for even a second that he'd be one of them..."

Even without using her eyes, Shannon could tell that Miranda was acting differently than usual. There was a bashful tone to her voice, and a pep to her step that spoke of a sense of joy and fun. And so, the reality of her elder sister's feelings was clear as day to Shannon—Miranda was absolutely delighted.

"I don't have any opinion on him one way or the other," Shannon finally said, a slight ripple of irritation in her voice. "It's just funny how things work. It's such a small world we live in..."

"Isn't it?" Miranda exclaimed, seeming to completely ignore the crankiness in her sister's voice.

She just has a slight crush, Shannon thought, but she couldn't stop the wave of jealousy that came over her. Whatever, he's not worthy of my big sis anyways. I'll get rid of him soon enough. And when I do...I wonder how she'll react...

A grin stretched over Shannon's lips as she stared at her elder sister's back. Her eyes lit up gold, tracing Miranda's long, circular movements as she stirred the pot over their stove.

As soon as I got back to the inn the night that I'd met the Circry girls, I laid down in bed and sent my mind to the round-table room inside the Jewel. As the name implied, it was a circular room with a round table set right in the center, around which there were just enough chairs to provide seating for me and all my ancestors.

One of these chairs was missing, however—the chair that had used to belong to the founder of House Walt. A silver greatsword now held the spot instead, floating above the place where the chair used to be. It served as a constant reminder that the wild man who'd served as our progenitor was no longer here.

The atmosphere in here is...rather dark, I thought apprehensively as I settled into my chair.

But I didn't get a chance to ask why—nearly as soon as I arrived, the second head erupted, "Sixth head, you're going to explain to us why you said what you did back there, aren't you? If you're telling us to crush a young child's eyes, you must have quite a reason."

"I'm not recommending we do it," the sixth head explained, his voice strained. "I'm just saying it's something we should consider. Those eyes of hers...they're dangerous."

It doesn't sound like he said to crush them because he wanted to, I realized. *It seems more like he felt compelled to give us a warning.*

The seventh head nodded. "It might sound overblown to refer to them as orphic eyes," he said, folding his arms, "but there's no doubt that they hold incredible power. Although I'm not sure if the girl can use them as well as my aunt—Milleia Walt—was able to."

So the woman who married into House Circry was named Milleia Walt, I thought. *Though I guess I should call her Milleia Circry now...*

The fourth head's eyes locked onto the fifth's face. "You're going to have to

explain this properly,” he said in a stern tone.

The fifth head pressed his hands together, hanging his head. “Milleia was one of my daughters,” he said. “She was unable to see from the day she was born. She bore quite a resemblance to Miranda in terms of facial features, but she had Shannon’s amber eyes and pale-violet hair. Though I guess technically *they* are the ones who take after her, not the other way around... In any case, she was blind.”

“I see,” the third head said, a dubious look coming over his face. “I’m...curious to know how you ended up treating her, with a disability like that. In my era, it was common for such children to be locked away, and I was always hearing of them developing sudden ‘illnesses.’”

The fifth head chuckled. “Milleia was happily married when she grew up—that should tell you all you need to know. We treasured her. At one point, I considered letting her marry one of our vassals who understood her situation, but things took a turn once the power in her eyes manifested.”

I’m glad House Walt didn’t end up locking her away... I thought, a bit relieved. It seemed my own life of confinement had really soured me on the concept.

“According to Milleia,” the fifth head continued, “she was able to perceive mana as tiny beads of light. As far as she could tell, those beads circulated through all life-forms. When at rest, they would float around in the air. The ability to perceive such a thing by itself wouldn’t have been an issue,” the fifth head said, voice growing stronger, “except Milleia realized that the mana she saw moved in accordance with shifts in the human psyche. In other words, Milleia could use her eyes to read human emotions.”

The fifth head sighed, rubbing at his forehead. “It would have been astounding enough, if that was all she could do. But there’s more. After conducting some experiments with her eyes, Milleia came to me and informed me of the results. That’s how I learned that she could not only manipulate the mana she saw, but could use that ability to forcibly alter the mana circulating in those around her, allowing her to alter their emotions.”

That’s...pretty amazing, for sure... I thought, feeling a bit leery now. *Though “terrifying” might be the better word.*

The fourth head seemed to be of a similar mind to me—a conflicted look had come over his face. “That *is* quite a scary ability, admittedly. Depending on how she used it, things could turn quite ugly—”

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” the sixth head cut in. “But Milleia’s usage of her power wasn’t even the main problem—manipulating emotions was only the beginning of her abilities. Using her eyes, she could control any bit of mana she saw. If she’d wanted to, she could have easily bent the people around her to her will, and all she had to do to cast advanced magic spells was make a slight alteration to the mana in her vicinity. There was this guy who was a master of concealing himself with his Art... Milleia found him with just a glance.”

“And I’m guessing that was during another of her experiments, right?” the second head asked, all seriousness. “If she’d known to search for someone who was hiding, I assume she’d have had an even easier time discovering the man.”

The sixth head nodded, grinning. “The guy Milleia found back then was a famous assassin. Before she caught him, detecting the man was said to be impossible. She even managed to stop a poisoning one time—she saw everything, *including* the maid who’d done it.”

“At this point, I’ve got to wonder if there’s anything she *couldn’t* do,” the third head said, whistling. “My Art would’ve been totally useless against her.”

The sixth head heaved a deep sigh, folding his arms across his chest. “Luckily, me and dad, we always treasured Milleia. We made sure no one ever treated her poorly due to her lack of sight. And, despite having all that power, she was a kind girl, you know. It always put my mind at ease, having her around.”

“Yeah, you really did dote on Milleia more than your other sisters,” the fifth head said in a cold tone. “Honestly, it was a bit off-putting. At her wedding, you were bawling your eyes out, crying harder than anyone else. It was so painful to watch that I couldn’t help but think I needed to get my own act together.”

The sixth head’s eyes narrowed, shooting daggers toward his father.

“*Ahem,*” the seventh head said, breaking the tense silence that had fallen over the table. “The point of this conversation is, had my aunt been neglected and grown up feeling she had a bone to pick with House Walt, we would have been wiped from the face of this Earth. That’s how fearsome she was.”

Why did they allow someone so dangerous to marry into another house, then?
I wondered, growing curious.

The fifth head must have seen the question in my eyes, for he continued, “Milleia was a kind girl, you see, and by the time she came of age, we were in the depths of a brutal era of war and death. Before long, Milleia began to use her powers to treat those whose minds fell apart out on the battlefield. At first, she only treated members of her family, but soon that expanded to others within House Walt’s territory. Rumors spread of her abilities, and before long the future head of House Circry, who’d been traumatized in the war, came to our estate seeking her help. He spent the night at the estate, and once Milleia used her powers to lessen his burdens, they got to talking...”

“The moment that Circry brat’s treatment was over,” the sixth head spat, eyes alight with rage, “he came straight to me, asking for Milleia’s hand in marriage. I gave him a good walloping, but Milleia covered for him... Even my own moms turned against me! *Goddamnit!*”

The fifth head was quick to end his story after that. Apparently, unbeknownst to the sixth head, Milleia had grown close to the future head of House Circry over the short time she’d cared for him. Ceding to her wishes, the fifth head had given her his blessing to marry into the other man’s house, and Milleia had been given away surrounded by the blessings and good cheer of many.

The second head pressed a hand to his forehead. “To bring us back to the main topic at hand, it seems that Shannon Circry has inherited Milleia’s orphic eyes.”

The fifth head nodded. “I don’t know how closely Shannon’s eyes mirror Milleia’s in ability, but the way they glowed was exactly the same. Miranda is the one who resembles her most closely in appearance, though.”

Now that the topic had wound its way back to Miranda, I turned to the seventh head. “Come to think of it, back at Miranda’s house, you said she and I might have...possibly...”

I gulped. *Gotten married in the future...*

The seventh head nodded. “Yes, that’s right. As you know, when you were younger it was expected that you’d one day inherit the title of Earl Walt. If the

royal family didn't have a girl of marriageable age available for you to become affianced to by that time, I intended to recommend an engagement between you and one of the daughters of House Circry. If we wanted to ascend to duke status, having the cooperation of an influential court noble would be invaluable to us, you see. I didn't really care about that one way or the other, but once my aunt passed...well, I admit I felt the desire to reforge the connection between our houses."

It sounds like House Walt and House Circry had quite a good relationship with one another, I thought, a wave of dismay flooding over me. *And, thanks to me, that relationship was ruined.*

I was fully prepared to spiral into despair at this realization, but was stopped in my tracks when the third head shot me a cheeky grin.

"Who would have guessed that the girl Lyle pretended to hit on would end up being someone he was once fated to marry?" he asked, chuckling. "And to think that he'd meet her now, after he's already picked up three other girlfriends... Aaah, I feel bad for poor Miranda."

"My thoughts *exactly*," the fourth head concurred. He shifted in his chair, the reflective lenses of his glasses giving off an ominous light. "That's why I *told* him not to—" He cut himself off, heaving a deep sigh. "I mean, Lyle, come on. Did you not stop at any moment to consider how rude it would be for you to do that to her?"

Six pairs of chastising eyes fell upon me.

I've got no choice but to endure it, I thought, even as I felt my shoulders scrunching up. *This is what I get for going against my ancestors' advice. It's no laughing matter.*

"How about we leave it at that?" a voice finally cut in.

To my surprise, my savior came in the form of the fifth head, of all people.

"Even if their encounter...wasn't the best," he continued, "I'm still happy that my great-great-grandson got to meet Milleia's great-granddaughter. And, as a result, now we know that Shannon possesses Milleia's orphic eyes. As for what we should do now...I think our priority should be discerning Shannon's

disposition.”

There wasn't a single smiling face at the table. Everyone was dead serious, dreading the part we might have to play.

“Even if she *has* inherited Milleia's eyes,” the seventh head told the fifth, “we've still yet to see whether she's inherited all of her abilities. But from what you've just said, it seems you think we'll have to get rid of her regardless.”

“We most likely will,” the fifth head replied, voice chilly. “It all depends on her personality. Even if she's quite weak now, if she's got a problematic disposition we'll be forced to take action—if we leave her be, she'll become incredibly dangerous. Shannon could very well end up as the Heretical God's Child our founder feared Ceres had become. I don't know anything about your sister, Lyle, but if someone said *Shannon* had brainwashed you? I'd believe it.” The fifth head tangled his hands through his hair, his head drooping. “I can't just ignore her,” he murmured miserably. “I can't let that girl use my daughter's eyes for evil.”

He's concerned Shannon will mar Milleia's legacy, I realized. My eyes darted to the sixth head, who gazed down at his folded arms, saying nothing. *Seems like he feels the same way.*

I felt a little shell-shocked—I'd never expected for the title of “Heretical God's Child” to come up in this conversation. That was what the founder had called Ceres back when I'd told him my story. He'd been certain that she was one of the beings whose existence was beloved by a heretical god. Not a single one of my ancestors had believed him, and yet...now the fifth head said that he wouldn't blink an eye if Shannon became one.

The whole thing just didn't sit quite right with me. Mainly because of one particular reason: Shannon didn't feel anywhere near as threatening to me as Ceres did.

Chapter 46: Damian Valle's Request

The next morning, I found myself at a café around ten in the morning. I'd eaten breakfast at the inn first, after which I'd dressed myself up in the clothes I reserved for casual outings, heading out into the streets of Aramthurst alone. After that, I'd spent a short bit of time wandering around town before arriving at the location where I'd arranged to meet Miranda.

Everything was going fine until I stepped into the café. I'd had every intention to apologize to her sincerely for my actions the previous day, and I'd decided to accept her reaction, however ugly it might be—even if it included a slap or a punch.

That's her right, after what I did, I'd thought, sitting down at a table across from her.

But then...something unexpected had happened.

"Now, what's going on here?" I heard the third head ask, voice amused. "This might just be your worst-case scenario, Lyle."

A woman had stood from the table beside where I'd just sat. She shifted in front of me, her brow twitching, her mouth curled into a smile that didn't come close to reaching her eyes. Her entire face demanded an explanation from me.

I'd have expected such a thing from the girl I'd actually come to meet, but there was only one problem—the woman standing before me *wasn't* Miranda.

"What are you doing here, Lyle?" Aria snapped. "I had to wonder what it was that you found so urgent that you felt the need to decline our invitation, and it was *this*?"

Another woman climbed to her feet and stepped forward, her face calm, almost apathetic. "Lyle, may I ask what exactly your relationship is with this fine lady?"

I stared blankly at Sophia, horrified. Her attitude toward me was completely different than normal—it was like she'd grown thorns.

That was when the third woman stepped forward. “Milord,” Novem said, a level of disappointment in her eyes that made me recoil, “if you wish to pick up a lady, I would appreciate it if you ran her by me in advance.”

What’s that supposed to mean?! I roared internally. You act like I’m picking up women left and right!

I was abruptly overcome with the urge to scream, “You’ve got me all wrong! That isn’t what I’m doing here at all!” I couldn’t quite summon the courage, though, once I noticed all the waiters and customers whispering among themselves, having clearly sensed the strange atmosphere surrounding our table.

This is bad, I thought weakly. This is really, really bad. Miranda’s got to be furious.

But when Miranda finally spoke up, it wasn’t to yell at me. “Wait,” she said with a smile, “is that you, Aria? Aria Lockwood?”

“H-Huh?!” Aria said, spinning around. “*Miranda?* The Circry one?”

“Yes, that’s right!” Miranda replied happily. “How have you been?”

“I-I’m doing all right,” Aria replied slowly, brow scrunching. “But Miranda... Why are you meeting up with Lyle?”

Looks like they know each other, I thought, feeling very out of my depth. Miranda doesn’t seem angry, though. She actually seems like she’s happy to get the chance to see an old acquaintance again. My eyes flickered over to Aria’s face. Aria looks pretty happy to see her too. They must be on good terms.

Still, even Aria’s happiness over seeing an old friend couldn’t detract from her raging curiosity. Her eyes shifted rapidly from Miranda’s face to mine, back and forth and back again.

“Oh,” Miranda began, “truth be told—”

I couldn’t stand to let her say a thing more—I lurched to my feet, planted both of my hands onto my and Miranda’s table, and slammed my forehead into the wood. The violent thud from the impact rippled through the restaurant, followed by the sound of clinking cups.

“I’m sorry!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “I’m really, *really* sorry!!!”

“L-Lord Lyle?” Novem stuttered, looking at me anxiously. “What are you apologizing for...?”

Inside the Jewel, the fourth head sighed. “Way to go, Lyle,” he said mockingly. “Now it just looks like you’re apologizing to a girl you hit on for already having multiple girlfriends. How lamentable.”

The whispers echoing through the café grew even louder, as if the customers and waitstaff around us were growing heated on this exact topic.

So...it seems that they all think that I’m a pathetic guy who came to apologize with his group of girlfriends, huh? I thought, shriveling inside.

I’d never imagined that I’d come across Novem and the others at the same café that I’d agreed to meet up with Miranda, let alone at the neighboring table. But now, unfortunately for me, there was nowhere to run. I had absolutely no idea what excuse to make to defuse the situation, especially since the whole thing had started with Aria asking me if I wanted to hang out with her and the girls this morning, an invitation I’d been forced to refuse.

I felt an intense urge to drop my head into my hands. *This...is the worst timing imaginable...*

“Sorry, Lyle,” the sixth head whispered from inside the Jewel. “Even I’m lost on how to help you with this one.”

“Just be honest about what happened and sincerely apologize to everyone,” the seventh head told me. “That’ll help clear things up. You got yourself into this—it’s your responsibility to get yourself out.”

So this is what I get for acting without thinking, I thought with a sigh. *The weight of responsibility is heavy indeed.*

First things first, I had to lift my head from the table and face the four girls hovering around me. Once I’d managed that, I slowly began to explain everything that had happened from the very beginning. It went without saying that when I mentioned the fake pick-up part, a few of their eyes turned very, very cold.

“*Oh*, so that’s what happened,” Miranda said thoughtfully, shooting me a smile.

I blinked at her, still waiting for what felt like the inevitable slap. “M-Maybe it’s a bit odd for me to say this...” I mumbled, “but you’d be totally within your rights to smack me right now, Miranda.”

“At the very least, I thought she’d splash a cup of water on you,” the third head teased. “Hmm... Seems Miranda’s pretty nice. Maybe a bit *too* nice.”

“So,” the sixth head said, sounding a bit pleased. “She’s not just similar to Milleia in appearance—Miranda’s inherited her forgiving heart as well. And to think that such a sweet girl was strung along, by my direct descendant no less...” He let out a hefty sigh. “I want to cry.”

I could feel the seventh head pulsing in the back of my head with the need to say something in reply, but ultimately he held his tongue.

Back in the café, Aria climbed to her feet. “You know, Miranda,” she said, a frisson of worry in her tone, “if you keep forgiving everyone so easily for the things they do to you, one of these days you’re going to end up suffering big time. You *can* get angry, you know. C’mon, give him a good whack.”

But Miranda did no such thing—she just shot Aria a troubled smile and took a sip from her cup of black tea. “It just wouldn’t feel right,” she said softly. “Lyle had his own reasons for acting as he did, and the issues he’s facing aren’t his alone—they affect your ability to make a living too, Aria.”

This time, Aria was the one to make the troubled expression. “That’s true,” she murmured, sliding slowly back into her seat. “But I still think you’re being too kind. So—”

“Thank you, Aria,” Miranda said, cutting her off. Seemingly done with that portion of the conversation, she turned to face me. “Lyle, if you want the right to enter the dungeon...I think we could work something out.”

Sophia leaned forward, latching onto Miranda’s words. “Really?!” she asked, voice shimmering with excitement.

Miranda nodded, taking another sip of her tea. “All Academy students are granted the right to enter the dungeon. I might not look it, but I’m registered as

an adventurer too, I'll have you know. That said, I'll still have to put in an application if I want to go into the dungeon, and I normally only do so when my assignments require it. The boys, now—I've heard they go into the dungeon just to show off their skills sometimes."

That made sense to me—Aramthurst's dungeon was as formidable as any other. It was only natural that Academy students felt the urge to prove their capabilities by plumbing its depths. Though, according to what Clara told us a few days before, of late noble boys would simply hire adventurers to do the work for them, coasting along without lifting a finger themselves.

"Ah, I see," the fourth head said. "Those Academy students who were making such a ruckus at the Guild back when you first got here—they'd probably just come out of the dungeon. Now that I think about it, the adventurers they'd hired to go with them looked quite competent."

The second head let out an exasperated sigh, "So what, you're telling me these kids just hire people to do the dirty work for them, and then claim they cleared several dungeon floors on their own? Who the hell's going to believe that?!" I could almost hear him rolling his eyes. "All they're doing is making themselves less credible. And now if there's a group of students who actually *do* accomplish something, no one's going to take them at their word."

To be honest, I thought, I'm sure those guys only care about getting themselves a good government post. They have no reason to care about what happens to anyone else.

"Taking me along would temporarily solve your problem," Miranda continued, "but it would be inconvenient for me to accompany you every single time. I have my own schedule to keep, and there are times when I simply won't be able to go."

"In that case," Novem said, "would you mind introducing us to some of your friends at the Academy? With our level of skill, such an arrangement should be quite convenient for them."

Miranda shook her head. "You certainly sound confident, but skill level isn't going to be your main obstacle—there are certain weeks during the year where not even a single Academy student has the time to enter the dungeon. On top

of that, most of my acquaintances have similar schedules to mine, meaning they won't be able to accompany you very often."

Hmm... I thought. That doesn't sound too good. Basically, we'll be able to go in, but the conditions on when we're going to be able to go are even stricter than we expected.

"That paints quite a different picture than what Clara told us," Sophia lamented. "It sounds like even though we'll be able to enter the dungeon, it's going to be quite inconvenient..."

"Clara?" Miranda broke in, her voice a bit startled. "Are you talking about Clara Bulmer, the supporter?"

Aria nodded. "That's right," she replied. "Is she famous? She didn't look it."

An odd look came over Miranda's face. "Oh, how should I put it...?" she muttered. "Clara's famous, in a way. People call her a wandering fairy, or even the Lord of the Library or other such monikers. Regardless, she's an outstanding supporter. The Guild is aware of her talents, so they often recommend her to students who express an interest in entering the dungeon. Perhaps that's why she misunderstood."

Novem cocked her head curiously. "What did Clara misunderstand, exactly?"

"Well," Miranda replied, "Clara's recommended so often by the Guild that she's constantly going into the dungeon. She must think that the Academy's students have nothing but time on their hands. There are some, admittedly, who enroll but would rather challenge the dungeon than attend their classes. I'm not friendly with any of those sorts, mind you. In fact, I'm quite happy to keep my distance."

Sounds like most of the students Clara interacts with are troublemakers, I thought. Meanwhile, it seems their more proper counterparts are busy studying and the like, so they don't often get the chance to venture into the dungeon's depths.

"Some students *do* take on side jobs in order to pay for their tuition or living expenses," Miranda continued, "and in that case, the dungeon is always the place they're able to earn the most money. But more often, those students are

only trying to make money in order to goof off around the city. Do you really think you'll be able to make the sort of money you're after while looking after a bunch of folks who are entering the dungeon just to fritter away their funds?"

We all shook our heads, defeated.

Miranda gave us all a kind, sympathetic smile. "From time to time, the situation back in Central worsens, and some kids actually have to work hard in order to gather the funds for their tuition. But in those cases, the Academy often offers those students some support and introduces them to proficient adventurers. You most likely won't be able to get into the dungeon that way either."

I sighed. *From what she's told us so far, it's really going to be a complicated process to get ourselves into that dungeon,* I thought.

"The circumstances in Aramthurst really are quite complicated," the fourth head said, voice tired. "It's a completely different world than the rest of the country. I doubt most outsiders would be able to understand the dynamics going on here, even if they were explained to them fully."

Seems so, I thought. Since Aramthurst operated under circumstances distinctly different from the rest of the nation, it made sense that the bits of information that escaped to the outside world would most often fall on deaf, uncomprehending ears. *There's really no way we could have understood what we were in for before we got here,* I realized. *No wonder people see this city as such a strange, mysterious place.*

"There *is* one thing I think you could do that might help though," Miranda said, breaking into my thoughts. "And you four are quite confident in your skills, aren't you?" A smile crossed her face—like a child who'd just thought of an interesting prank.

We all nodded.

I'm not sure exactly what level of skill she's looking for, I thought. *But our party certainly isn't weak.*

"Well, then..." Miranda said slowly. "Why don't you try taking on a professor's request?"

My eyes widened. *Did she just propose we complete a job for one of the people that holds the highest level of authority in this city?*

When Miranda returned home from her outing, Shannon noted it was with a visible skip in her step. Before Shannon knew it, Miranda began rattling off detail after detail, explaining the events that had put her in such high spirits.

“Do you remember that girl we used to play with out on the lawn, Shannon? Aria Lockwood? Well, it turns out she’s come to Aramthurst!”

Aria Lockwood...? Shannon mused.

The name rang a bell for her, but there had been loads of noble girls who visited the Circry estate to play. The number who’d gotten the chance to know Shannon was quite low though—she could count them on one hand.

Ahhh, Shannon thought. *I think I know who she’s talking about.*

“I vaguely remember someone of that name,” Shannon told her sister. “I believe it was said she had red hair?”

“Yes, that’s her!” Miranda said cheerfully. “I heard she was driven out of Central, but she seems to be doing well enough now. It’s honestly quite a relief. I actually chatted with her and the rest of her party for a bit, and in the end we all decided to get together and take on a professor’s request from the Guild!”

Shannon pursed her lips. *What about Lyle, though? He was the one she went out today to go see. She hasn’t even brought him up once—she just keeps shifting from topic to topic.* Her eyes narrowed. *Something must have happened, so...guess I’ll just have to take a look.*

The conversation between the two girls hit a brief lull as Miranda turned away and focused on cooking their dinner. Eyes flashing gold, Shannon stared intently at Miranda’s back, using her powers to read her sister’s emotions.

What she found made a frown cross her lips. *I see...* Shannon thought. *So you’re sad, sis. Very sad.*

Shannon focused in on the mana that lingered around her elder sister, manipulating the colored motes that spoke of her sorrow. Miranda twitched, then froze. Climbing from her wheelchair, Shannon crept up behind her sister’s

rigid body, embracing her from behind.



“Aha!” Shannon said triumphantly. “Sis, you poor thing. You’ve been weakened so much I can take control of you just like that. You must have been absolutely devastated.”

At Shannon’s words, Miranda’s eyes went dark, the light seeping out of them. Her face went blank, emotionless.

“Am I...sad?” Miranda asked helplessly, her mouth slowly forming the words.

“You *are*,” Shannon crooned into her sister’s ear. “You’re very, *very* sad, sis. What happened?”

“Lyle...said he never liked me,” Miranda said in a languid, listless tone. “He has a whole harem of other women already, but I...was actually pretty happy when he asked me out...”

No wonder I can dominate her mind so easily, Shannon thought, stifling a laugh.

“He sounds terrible, sis,” Shannon said with a smile. “How about I—?”

“N-No!” Miranda gasped, her voice regaining a bit of emotion. “You can’t, Shannon. You absolutely...can’t...”

Shannon clicked her tongue, her eyes narrowing in annoyance at the sight of her sister vehemently shaking her head in denial. Her mask slipped, revealing the truth behind the feeble ephemeral guise she always wore.

“You always do this!” Shannon shouted at her sister in irritation. “You *always* decide that everything’s your fault, and you *always* think everything will work out as long as you can endure it long enough! How long-suffering of you, sis. How *admirable*. I’m not stupid—I know that’s why you followed me to this godforsaken place. You felt *responsible* for me.”

“I was just...worried about you...” Miranda protested in a powerless voice.

But Shannon’s mind had shifted to another topic. “Hmm...” she hummed, a thoughtful look coming over her face. “But you know...this time is different, isn’t it? You’re genuinely heartbroken. Otherwise, you’d be fighting against me like you always do, refusing to say a single word. You wouldn’t be answering all my questions like you are now.”

Silence fell. Miranda didn't say a word in opposition. Eventually, Shannon released the mental restraints she'd placed on her, not wanting to add further to her burdens.

"I need to take my time with sis," Shannon muttered under her breath. "I've got to carefully shape her. But that Lyle guy...he pisses me off. I don't like him hurting my sister like this, even though I have to admit it's made her a lot more obedient..."

To Shannon, Miranda was more than just her big sister—she was the mother Shannon had never had. But the strong sense of familial love she felt toward Miranda had been tainted with betrayal after the conversation Shannon had heard between her and their father.

Oh, but that's right, Shannon realized. *I can use sis to—*

"H-Huh?" Miranda stammered, snapping back to attention now that Shannon's powers had worn off. "What was I...doing...?"

"Is something wrong, sis?" Shannon asked.

Miranda turned around, her gaze still a bit muddled as it fell on her younger sibling. Shannon smiled up at her, once again playing the role of the cute, frail little sister.

"Shannon...?" Miranda murmured, pressing a hand to her face. She quickly pulled away, staring at her sweaty fingertips in confusion.

"Yep, I'm still here, sis! What was it you were saying earlier about what happened to Aria?"

"I...I'm sorry," Miranda replied haltingly. "It looks like I'm a little tired. I'm going to go wash my face."

Shannon lifted a hand, giving her sister a jaunty little wave as she shuffled out of the kitchen.

The day after my meetup with Miranda, I dropped by Aramthurst's famous library in search of Clara. Miranda had mentioned that the palatial building, which was known to be the greatest hub of knowledge on the continent, was

one of the supporter's more frequent haunts.

To be honest, though, I had yet to step inside the massive building—its sheer size had struck me dumb, petrifying me into a gaping statue before its doors. I had to crane my neck to even see a fraction of its magnitude. It was only the giggles of those passing me by that brought me back to myself.

They must think I'm some country bumpkin, I thought, flushing in embarrassment.

At least my ancestors weren't laughing at me too—the Jewel had descended into pandemonium as soon as the library came into sight.

"What's this?" the third head gasped, his usual flippant attitude gone without a trace. "You mean *this* is where they keep all the books?! If the place is this huge, imagine how many volumes they have in there!"

"Yes, yes, we get it," the seventh head cut in, trying to pacify him. "Now can you pipe down, already?"

I assumed the seventh head's chiding hadn't worked, because the next thing I heard was him shrieking, "*Hey!* Quit flailing around, you fool! O-One of you, get over here and help me!"

From the abundance of noise that continued to filter into my head, it seemed the third head wasn't one to be subdued so easily—it sounded like several of my ancestors had been needed just to pin him down.

I decided to leave them to it, focusing back on the building in front of me. "I should go in..." I murmured to myself, finally forcing my feet to shuffle their way up to the doors.

The moment I stepped inside, I was greeted with the sight of a long desk; several librarians were stationed behind it. I stepped in front of the one that was closest, quickly explaining that this was my first time using the library. From there, I was courteously guided through the registration process.

In order to use the library, they required the submission of an initial deposit at the time of registration. The librarian explained to me that this hefty sum was to be set aside in advance in case I damaged or misplaced a book during the course of my time in the library. If all went well, however, the money would all

be returned to me once I canceled my membership. In addition to this sum, I'd also be required to pay a copper coin upon entry for all future visits.

Once the librarian finished their explanation, I accepted their terms and went ahead and put down my deposit.

"Come to think of it," I asked as the transaction drew to a close, "do you know where I might find Clara?"

The librarian's brows furrowed. "I cannot answer questions of that nature," she replied firmly.

Oops, I thought, wincing. Seems like that's a touchy subject.

"Sorry," I said, feeling thoroughly reprimanded. "Just forget that I even asked."

Now that my registration was successfully completed, I took my finished library card from the librarian and finally wandered deeper into the building. The interior was divided into several different rooms, each lined with shelves upon shelves of books. Each shelf reached all the way to the top of the library's towering ceiling, and was crammed with so many books I felt like one might burst at any moment.

"There's gotta be tens—no, *hundreds* of thousands of books in here," I said in awe.

And that was only an assessment of a few of the library's rooms—if the amount of books stored in the building really matched the sheer scale of the space as I'd seen it from the outside, I couldn't even begin to imagine the total number of volumes kept within.

I spent the next few minutes peeking into various rooms as I made my way deeper into the library's rooms, continuing along until I finally spotted a girl with a prosthetic arm making her way down the corridor. She looked like she was just about to step into one of the rooms off the hall.

"Hey, Clara!" I called out to her.

She turned toward me, eyes blank as they flickered over my face. "I didn't expect to see you here."

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” I explained quickly. “It’s about a job.”

“You came to the library for work?” she asked, one of her brows raising. “Whatever, it’s fine. Follow me.”

Clara veered away from the room she was about to enter, leading me down a corridor even more vast than the ones I’d traveled down before. She led me to a spot with a table, some chairs, and a massive window hung with a sign that declared the space a break area. There was a door nearby as well, leading out into what appeared to be a courtyard.

“This is a part of the library where you can eat and drink,” Clara explained as she took a seat. “The librarians don’t get angry if you talk a bit loudly here either.”

I nodded, snatching the chair situated across from hers. Then I dove right into the meat of the conversation. “Long story short, my party has decided to accept a request from an Academy professor named Damian Valle.”

Hearing this, Clara’s eyes momentarily flitted toward her artificial left arm. “I saw that request—it’s for the Demonic Stone of the boss of the fortieth floor of the dungeon, yes? You must have resolved your dungeon entry issues if you’re bringing something like that to me.”

I shook my head. “Not entirely. We found someone who’s willing to go with us, but she has her own schedule to keep. Apparently, most of the students who go into the dungeon frequently are delinquents. The more dedicated Academy students seem to enter the dungeon much more rarely.”

Clara removed her glasses and wiped off the lenses, her head hanging low over the table. If I wasn’t imagining things, her cheeks were a bit red.

Seems like she’s realized she made a mistake, I thought.

“My apologies,” she mumbled. “It seems my understanding of the situation was a bit off. In any case, if you’re coming to me, you must want a supporter. How large is your party?”

“Well, there’s four people in our party...” I said slowly, counting it all out on my fingers. “Then there’s Miranda from the Academy...and you.”

At this, Clara quickly slipped her glasses back on, her sleepy eyes widening to their limit. “Are you insane?” she demanded. “I’ve taken part in a mission that went to the thirtieth floor, and they took almost fifty people. I’ve heard you need twice that to reach the fortieth.”

This wasn’t a totally outlandish bit of information, as it was well known that the number of people you should take with you into a dungeon increased depending on how deep you were planning on going.

This was because challenging a large-scale dungeon likely meant that a party would have to camp out inside its walls for several nights. All humans required food, sleep, and water; they needed time to do their business, cleanse themselves, and rest. Add to this the fact that most dungeons grew more difficult as you proceeded through them, and you quickly realized that the longer your campaign lasted, the higher the amount of supplies you’d need to keep everyone going.

That was where supporters came in. Dungeons weren’t forgiving enough to fight through with heavy bags on your back, so supporters had to shoulder the burdens of the adventurers focusing on combat. Having a number of supply carriers in your party was an absolute necessity—it was the only way for a party’s warriors and mages to fight at their highest capabilities.

Meeting Clara’s eyes, I said, “My party has our own special way of tackling dungeons. A secret weapon, of sorts.” I slid my hand around the chain hanging around my neck, lifting the Jewel up for Clara to see.

“A Gem?” Clara asked, narrowing her eyes. “Blue means it has support skills...” She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Fine. I’ll go with you, but if at any time I think you are being reckless, I will turn around and leave. If that’s all right with you, I’m willing to go ahead and sign a contract. Also...”

“Also?”

“I thought I should ask... Did you register at the library just to see me?”

“Oh. Well, yeah,” I replied honestly. “Though, maybe not *entirely*... I like books, and I was planning on registering sooner or later. Today, though, I only came to see you. I heard this was the best place to find you when you weren’t

working.”

The impassiveness on Clara’s face cracked for a moment, a slight smile seeping through. Apparently she’d liked my response.

“Is that so?” she asked, sleepy eyes twinkling faintly behind her glasses. “I’m glad to hear it—I like people who like books. Now, let’s move on to the contract. I’m quite proficient at being a supporter, so I’m not cheap.”

“That’s why it has to be you,” I said with a shrug. “How could I go with anyone else?”

“I know you didn’t mean it to come off that way, Lyle,” the fourth head said, sounding a bit troubled, “but that sounded quite a bit like a confession of love. Get back to talking about contracts, hmm?”

“That’s just how Lyle is,” the third head said with a hearty laugh. “He gets more girls just by being himself than he does when he actually tries to hit on one.”

Oh, give me a break, I thought, rolling my eyes.

I tuned the whole lot of them out, focusing on signing Clara’s contract instead.

A few minutes after I left Clara behind at the library, I strolled up to the main entrance of Aramthurst’s Academy, the meeting spot where I’d be tackling my second item of business for the day.

“Lyle! Over here!” Miranda called as soon as she saw me, energetically waving her hand.

I smiled at her and headed in her direction.

“It’s pretty convenient that the library and the Academy are both at the center of the city, so close to one another,” I mused aloud.

Miranda giggled. “Well, of course they are. The dungeon, the Academy, and the library are Aramthurst’s three most defining features!”

Calling them Aramthurst’s “defining features” feels a bit much, I thought, *and it doesn’t do anything to explain why they’re all located at around the same*

spot.

I wasn't that interested in delving into the subject though, so I let it go. Instead, I just said, "I suppose that must be why they're located at the *heart* of the city. Makes total sense."

Pleasantries over, Miranda gestured for me to follow her and led me down a number of stone corridors to where Professor Damian was waiting for us. Along the way, she told me a bit of what she knew about him. Apparently, he was a part of a famous group of Academy members called the Great Seven.

"Does being a part of the Great Seven mean he's currently one of the most incredible people at the Academy?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Miranda replied. "Basically, the Great Seven is a moniker given to a number of Academy students who attended our institution, some all the way back when the Academy was founded. They were all...problem children, I guess you could say. They weren't just trouble though—they were incredibly skilled at what they did, and they brought prosperity to Aramthurst through their work. They caused a lot of problems too, since they were all weirdos who only cared about their research. If you count them all up, there's seven of them, which is why they're called the Great Seven and not some other number. As far as I know, Professor Damian's the only one who's still alive."

Having listened intently to this explanation, the second head chimed in, "Hey, do you really think we should be getting chummy with someone like that? I'm getting the feeling the guy's a pretty hopeless human being."

The fourth head pondered this briefly, then replied, "Well, we should at least go ahead and meet the man before we make any concrete decisions."

I fully agreed with that course of action—it wasn't like we were doing this for fun, after all. Our whole reason for carrying out a request for this so-called "problem child" was to get into the Academy's good graces.

"I agree," the seventh head chimed in. "To be honest, I don't think it really matters who this Damian fellow is. What's more important is finding a way out of dealing with those insufferable idiots at the Guild, and getting the Academy on your good side is a great way to gain enough clout to silence them. On that note, you should be using this opportunity to develop a closer relationship with

Miranda as well.”

The fifth and sixth heads were completely silent for this discussion, but I could feel their brains churning as they stared at Miranda’s back through my eyes.

After a while, Miranda came to a stop outside of a room with a bell installed by the door.

“We’re here, Lyle,” she said with a smile, reaching out and ringing it. A loud chime reverberated far down the corridor from where we stood.

Miranda waited a moment until the sound died away, then raised her voice and called through the door, “Professor Damian? It’s Miranda. I’ve brought an adventurer with me who’ll take on your request, just as I promised.”

A moment passed, upon which the silence of the corridor was broken by a loud crash within Professor Damian’s room. I heard something being dragged and then something being pushed aside, before the door finally slowly cracked open.

I had to lower my gaze to meet the glasses-covered eyes of the short man who peeked out from inside the room. For a moment, I thought I was looking at a child, but I could tell from the filthy white lab coat he wore that he was the professor we’d come to meet. The layer of shabby stained clothes he wore under the coat didn’t do much to improve my impression of him, nor did his head of unkempt brown hair.

This guy has a position high enough that he has a voice in how the city manages itself...? I thought incredulously.

At a loss, I could only manage to say a simple, “U-Umm...”

Before I could say anything else, though, the professor raised a hand. “Ah, sorry, but we’re just wasting time out here. Let’s go to the parlor, okay? We can talk about the request there. It’s a convenient enough place to meet, and they’ll put out tea for you too. Oh, and don’t bother introducing yourself. I’m terrible with names and faces.”

With that, the professor started marching off down the hallway, leaving us behind. He didn’t even look back to see if we were following after him.

That was a bit rude... I thought, perplexed.

Judging by the shocked silence in the Jewel, my ancestors were similarly taken aback. I glanced over at Miranda, who just smiled and shrugged.

“The professor treats everyone like that, so don’t worry,” she said, giggling a little. “To tell you the truth, he doesn’t remember my name either. He really *is* an incredible person though.”

Shortly after Miranda and I scurried along after Professor Damian, we caught up with him in the Academy’s parlor. We all sat down together, and an incredibly reluctant-looking staff member came over to serve us tea.

I stared, aghast, as Professor Damian picked up a small jar filled with granulated sugar off the table and proceeded to dump half of the entire contents into his own cup.

By this point, that drink has to be almost entirely sugar, I thought, stomach churning.

But the overwhelming amount of sweetness didn’t seem to affect the professor at all—he lifted his tea to his lips and drank it like the flavor was perfectly normal. I felt a sickly sweetness in my mouth just watching him.

With his thirst quenched—if such a concoction could actually function in such a manner—he began to speak. “We’ll skip the introductions,” he said shortly. “You know who I am, and I’m not going to remember who you are, so it’s pointless. I *hate* pointless things. That said, I’d like to cut straight to the point. I issued my request to the Guild over half a year ago, and no one’s been able to complete it thus far. No matter how strongly I insist, they keep giving me all sorts of absurd excuses and saying it’s impossible. I’d nearly come to the conclusion that I didn’t want to waste any more of my time on the matter.”

Apparently, the Guild had told Professor Damian that there were hardly any parties that could even make it to the thirtieth floor, let alone reach the fortieth.

It seems there aren’t too many skilled adventurers in Aramthurst right now, I mused. *Regardless, it’s obvious his request isn’t feasible if the Guild is reacting*

in such a way. He's being completely unreasonable.

In the end though, I didn't speak up and set the professor straight—it was clear my objection would mean less than nothing to him.

“That was, until that woman with you came to me with a proposal. She said she knew an adventurer who could make it to the fortieth floor, but he'd only just come to Aramthurst, so I'd have to put in a word with the Guild in order for him to be allowed into the dungeon. Now, I've done some adventurer-like things in my time; I've entered the dungeon, I've investigated, and I've fought monsters too. However, this is out of my area of expertise. I can't just look at someone and immediately gauge their skills. So I must ask, can you present me some evidence that you can clear my request?”

His concerns are quite sound, I thought, gripping the Jewel. I should probably just be honest with him.

“You should just explain everything to him, Lyle,” the second head said, affirming me in my opinion. “It'll make things go a lot quicker. You should put a gag order on him while you're at it, mind you.”

I nodded, then held the Jewel out toward the professor, resting it in the palm of my hand.

The professor's eyes narrowed. “A Gem...?” he asked slowly. “It's a rare enough item, but you know it has no value on its own, right?”

“Yes, of course,” I agreed, nodding. “This Je—*Gem*, I mean—has recorded the Arts of a number of my ancestors. At the moment, I can use five in total. They are all support-type Arts, and are quite varied in their applications. Once I put them to use in the dungeon, it'll be obvious just how strong they are. As for their abilities...”

I gave the professor an explanation of how all my Arts worked, and watched as a grin broke out over his face. It was clear he knew just as well as I that just because my Arts weren't geared toward direct combat, like those contained in red or yellow Gems, that didn't mean that they weren't incredibly useful.

“I see,” the professor finally said once I was finished. “The first and second Arts you listed are all well and good, but the rest sound quite handy,

particularly the last two... Certainly, having someone like you around who is able to increase the speed of yourself and others, map out an extensive area, and detect the whereabouts of the enemies around you, would make a dungeon much easier to challenge. I might even go so far as to call you a dungeon expert! Knowing all that, it's clear you're quite a good fit for my request."

"Remember," I reminded him, "it would be troublesome for me if you spread that information, though."

"Oh, right, that's your rule," the professor said quickly. "I'll remember. Now that you're working for me, it'd be pointless to make an enemy out of you. I won't leak your information. However...I'd like to add one more condition to my request."

I gave him a dubious look. "Another condition?"

The professor laughed, pushing himself back up against the spine of his chair. "Don't be so wary," he chided me. "I'll pay you a bonus for the extra work. It's just that I'd like to go with you to the fortieth floor—I want you to escort me. I can protect myself, mind you. Taking me along would greatly enhance your party's fighting strength."

I turned to Miranda, who nodded. "It's true," she said. "Professor Damian is strong. They call him the Dollmaster—using Golem, a magic he developed himself, he can control several powerful puppets at once, operating them as fluidly as his own arms and legs. He's quite skilled in more general magic spells as well. He'll be a help to us, I have no doubt."

After pondering this for a bit, I nodded, agreeing to the professor's terms.

"Excellent," he said, chuckling. "I was getting sick and tired of waiting. I'd decided that if no one took my request in the next short while, I might as well go to the fortieth floor myself. Since I've already made the necessary preparations, I figure it'll be more efficient for me to go ahead and join you than wait behind."

I...don't even think that any of that was a joke, I thought incredulously.

"Anyway," Professor Damian continued, "about that reward. You're free to

keep all the materials and Demonic Stones you get in the dungeon, and I'll go ahead and give you...something worth a few thousand gold coins. That work for you?"

Something about his phrasing seems a bit off, I mused. Maybe it's... Wait.

"You're planning on paying us in goods, then?" I asked the professor.

He nodded. "I used up all my funding, and they're refusing to give me any more—it's nonsense. They keep telling me they won't pay me until I produce results, but I need that Demonic Stone in order to do anything! So basically, I've got no choice but to pay you in goods."

This gave me a moment of pause. He can say the item's worth a few thousand gold coins all he wants, but if he won't tell me what it is, how do I know I'm making a good deal? What if I accept his offer and whatever it is turns out to be useless to me? What if I can't sell it for some reason?

"Why don't you just go ahead and agree?" the fourth head asked. "Selling the Demonic Stones and monster materials alone should still bolster your funds quite a bit. And don't forget that your initial objective was just to get permission to enter the dungeon. As long as you can get that, everything should be fine."

He's right, I realized. If I turn him down, we'll be the ones losing out, not him.

I looked back up at Professor Damian and nodded my agreement. "Understood," I told him. "Just don't forget to request permission for us to enter the dungeon."

Professor Damian smiled. "Just leave that to me. You might not think it just looking at me, but I'm actually on speaking terms with the Academy's headmaster. Although we *do* do more arguing than speaking, and we primarily speak about money... Anyway, about your bonus reward—might this do?"

The professor brandished a hand over the half-empty sugar jar sitting on the table; from it, a small doll made of powdered sugar emerged. It lifted the jar of the lid up briefly, peeking out at us, before slipping back inside and letting the top close again as it went.

"My students often beg me to teach them my magic," Professor Damian

explained, “so I do. It’s a nice way to make a bit of pocket change. Why don’t I make this spell your bonus?”

Hmm, I thought, that’s quite an interesting bit of magic.

Feeling intrigued, I nodded and took the professor up on his offer.

“All right, so that’s settled then,” Professor Damian proclaimed. “Any idea when we’re heading out? I’ll need...two days to make my final preparations.”

I nodded—that’s the length of time I thought my party would need as well. “Sounds good,” I told him. “Then please have the paperwork ready for us to sign in three days’ time.”

“Nice, nice!” Professor Damian cheered, clearly quite pleased. “No need to waste any of our time on complicated stuff—it’s best we keep things simple. Let’s hope the rest of our partnership unfolds just as smoothly as this has.”

Looks like Miranda was right, I mused as we shook hands and parted ways. He really doesn’t care about a thing outside of his own research.

“You see guys like that now and then,” the fourth head told me. “Humans who exhibit extreme prowess in a singular, specialized field. Professor Damian seems to be one of them, for better or worse.”

The seventh head hummed in agreement. “They’re the sort you can’t entrust anything to that falls outside of their expertise,” he added. “I had subordinates like that in my day, but they weren’t half as bad as that Damian guy.”

And so, our deal with Academy Professor Damian Valle was struck. I left the Academy, mind churning—the man certainly knew how to make an impression.

Chapter 47: Preparations

I started off my dungeon prep at a shop in Aramthurst that was frequented by adventurers. The city had quite a number of stores of a similar sort, since the ever-present dungeon lurking beneath its streets meant adventurers were always in need of exploration supplies. This particular shop dealt in a wide variety of goods, only excluding weapons and armor.

To my delight, all it took was a brief chat with the owner of the shop to get most of the items I was looking for. He seemed a bit taken aback at my request, though.

“You want seven people’s worth of supplies for the span of two weeks?” the owner asked. “That’s kinda rare to see.”

Novem, who’d accompanied me, cocked her head at this. “It is?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I mean, you’re going into the dungeon, right? It might not be so strange elsewhere, but in Aramthurst you rarely see a party of that size spend more than three or four days in the dungeon. For such a small party to stay in there for two whole weeks...? That’s practically unheard of. You make sure you don’t push yourselves too hard, okay? I know you’re young, so I get wanting to push yourself to the limit, but...”

“No need to worry,” I broke in. “We don’t plan on doing anything crazy. We just don’t get the chance to enter the dungeon very often, so we’re planning on taking our time and using it as a good learning experience.”

“I sure hope that’s true,” the shop’s owner replied, scratching at his head anxiously. “I’ve got everything I need from you now that I’ve taken your money, so you can count on me to have it all ready on schedule. You just make sure you come back home in one piece, okay?”

Novem and I thanked him for both his help and his concern, then made our way back out of the shop and into the city streets. I clapped my hand over my mouth nearly as soon as we’d stepped outside—the shop was located close to

Aramthurst's outer wall, and the sand clouds were horrible even at this time in the early morning.

"Aria and Sophia went to have tea with Miranda, right?" I asked Novem, my voice muffled. I'd started up the street, heading to our next shopping destination.

"Yes," Novem replied, nodding. "I turned down the offer in favor of attending to you, milord, but those three seem to be getting along quite well regardless. Miranda was already on good terms with Aria, and Aria and Sophia have grown increasingly close over the last few weeks."

"You could always go and enjoy tea with them if you'd like, Novem," I offered, doing my best to keep my tone level.

Novem gave me a long look. "Lord Lyle," she said chidingly, "do you really think you can do all the shopping by yourself? Just a moment ago, you were trying to buy everything at that other establishment simply because it was cheaper."

I winced. "Sorry..." I muttered.

Before we'd decided on purchasing our things from the previous shop owner, I'd noticed a store that had a sign outside that indicated that they stocked everything we'd needed. I'd gone ahead and popped my head in, and the incredibly friendly clerk had recommended me a plethora of different items. I'd been just about to buy the whole lot when Novem stepped in and forced me to stop. She'd made me look closer at the goods I'd been about to buy—the rations, though not actually rotten, had been horrendous. The quantity had been low as well, so that even if we'd ordered enough to feed seven people, it would have probably only fed five or six.

Basically...I'd nearly been scammed.

"It's really not a big deal, milord," Novem said in a gentle voice, as if sensing my self-castigation. "I wasn't trying to get an apology out of you, truly. It's just, you know what they say: two heads are better than one."

The smile Novem sent me next hurt. A lot.

"Poor Novem," the third head sighed, clearly trying to rile me up. "She can't

even go out and have fun because you're so unreliable. You might want to start putting more thought into fixing that, hmm, Lyle? You don't want to continue being so useless, do you?"

I clenched my fists, but didn't reply. As frustrating as it was, I had no rebuttal.

Novem and I reached our next destination not long after that, having waded through the clouds of dust to reach a shop located practically right next to the city's outer wall.

This place is pretty close to the Guild too, I thought as I walked up to the narrow alleyway that housed the shop's front door. *Makes sense, since they specialize in weaponry.*

I was only a step away from the alleyway's opening when a woman who looked as if she was an Academy student stumbled out of the shop's door. As she passed by me, I heard her mutter, "Why'd I have to fail them all...? This month is going to be rough."

I glanced over at her curiously, but didn't get a good look at her face beyond the fact that it looked distinctly haggard. The strangeness of her actions niggled at me a bit, but once I stepped into the shop, I had to let the line of thought go.

The store was narrower than any of the places I'd gone into in Darion, its tight space crammed with as many bits of equipment as the building could possibly hold. A bearded, demi-human gnome was ensconced behind the counter, putting a number of arrows away one by one. Once he saw us, though, he stepped forward to welcome us into the shop.

"Welcome in," he told us with a smile.

That must be the shop owner, I thought, looking downward so I could meet his eyes. He had a short and slender build, almost like a child's, so I practically towered over him.

He smiled at me, then turned back to the few arrows left on the counter, continuing to carefully store them away with a level of caution I found distinctly abnormal.

Overcome with curiosity, I couldn't help but ask, "Is there something special about those arrows you have there?"

The gnome's hands froze. With a somewhat troubled smile, he replied, "Yeah, these are burst arrows. They're imbued with magic, so they're what's called an enchanted weapon. Here, take a look."

He extended an arrow out to me, and once I peered closer, I realized that the heads were made, not of metal, but of clay. Novem had leaned in to take a look as well, and she lifted a hand to her lips, as if coming to some sort of realization.

"Are those glittering bits in the arrowheads fragments of Demonic Stones?" she asked, eyebrows raised. "Could it be that they were smashed and then melded into the clay before it set?"

The shop owner sent Novem a surprised look, which quickly faded into a wide smile. All of a sudden, he became a lot more talkative.

"So you can tell?" he asked Novem, his voice cheery. "You hit it right on the head—Demonic Stones, among other things, were crushed and kneaded into a special clay mix, which was then folded into the appropriate shape. Unfortunately, these ones here have a bit of a problem..." He sighed. "Usually, arrows like these are meant to invoke either wind or fire in order to raise the amount of damage inflicted on an enemy, but this batch is a complete failure. They might be called some fancy, overblown name, but..."

The gnome tore one of the arrowheads free from the rest of the shaft, then tossed it in a hefty metal garbage bin that was a safe distance away from us. As soon as the head hit whatever was smoldering within, there was an explosive popping sound followed by a torrent of smoke.

"O-Oh, my..." the seventh head said excitedly. "How wonderful! Those things might not make for the best arrows, but get all the heads bundled up together and you'd have the perfect bomb—"

"You fool!" the second head broke in, his voice fervent. "They're only so interesting *because* they're arrows! Give a good archer some of those, and he'll really get some time to shine!"

So, I thought, struggling not to laugh, *the second head's excited over using*

enchanted arrows with the weapon he specializes in, whereas the seventh head is just hyped up over the prospect of an explosion.

“As you can see,” the owner said, looking a bit disappointed, “all they can do is explode. They’re decently powerful, of course, but that’s not what we were looking for.”

This didn’t seem to deter Novem’s interest—she eyed the stack of enchanted arrows with wary curiosity. To tell the truth, they’d intrigued me as well.

“Still, they seem pretty amazing,” I told the shop owner. “You don’t think they might prove a powerful asset if you got your hands on enough?”

The gnome shook his head. “I don’t plan on doing anything of the sort. The heads only end up like this because the mix is unstable—the output is all over the place. That means you can’t count on them in a fight. Plus, they’re a huge pain to lug around. Normal arrows, now those you can fire in quick succession, right? These ones’ll blow up the second the heads touch each other, or if you shake ’em too hard, or if it’s too hot. They’ll blow up if you even look at them funny. The things go off way too easily, is what I’m saying. They can be useful, sure, but carrying around a whole lot of them is just asking for trouble.”

“What, so we can’t use them to make a decent payload...?” the seventh head asked mournfully. “But if you find out the manufacturing method...”

The second head sighed. “You can’t exactly use an arrow if you’re terrified it’s going to blow up on you,” he said in a disappointed tone. “Sure, if you’re skilled enough you’d be fine, but...you’d still have to worry over getting caught up in the explosion if an enemy gets too close. And if you can’t rapid-fire them either...”

The shop owner went on, making it clear that the arrows exploded when someone bumped into them or stepped on them too. He showed me the device that had been made to carry them around in, which was made up of a bunch of long, slender tubes. The inside of the tubes were lined with some kind of cushioning material, and were attached to the carrying case with strips of leather wrapped multiple times around the outside.

Sure enough, that shop owner’s right, I thought, disappointed. I definitely wouldn’t want to be responsible for carrying a load of those around, even with a

carrying case like that. It just doesn't feel safe. It'd be a huge pain to take them out too.

It was clear using these particular arrows would be a hell of a project, so I sighed and decided to give up. But before I turned away, the seventh head chimed in.

“Lyle,” he said excitedly, like he’d hatched some brilliant plan, “you might actually be able to make good use of those arrows with my Art!”

“Oh...” the third head said, seeming to catch onto what the seventh head was inferring. “Come to think of it, that just might work. This is just as good a time as any to teach him. Actually...how about I teach you my Art too, Lyle? It’s a simple enough thing to learn; it’s putting it into practice that’ll be the real issue.”

A burst of excitement ran through me. *I’m finally going to learn the last two of my ancestors’ Arts!*

Aria and Sophia looked nervously around the fashionable café they’d just been seated in, both girls feeling a bit put off by the location’s rather luxurious ambience. It was clear the place was a rank or two higher on the sophistication scale than any of the cafés they normally frequented—most of the tables were filled with pretty, high-class ladies. There were a few men scattered through the crowd as well, but every one of them had a woman on their arm.

The only reason Sophia had come to the café in the first place was because Aria had invited her—to be more precise, Miranda had invited Aria, and Aria had extended the invitation to Sophia and Novem in turn. Novem had been the only one of them that had decided not to visit the café; she’d chosen to accompany Lyle to purchase supplies instead.

“Hey, Miranda...” Aria muttered under her breath, “Are you sure it’s all right for adventurers to come into a place like this? I heard Aramthurst’s pretty cold to people in the profession.”

Oh, now that she mentions it... Sophia thought, growing more and more anxious, *back when we first arrived in Aramthurst, we got kicked out of the first*

inn we tried to stay at, since they “didn’t serve adventurers.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Sophia said quietly. “And I wouldn’t want to cause any trouble for you, Miranda.”

Miranda just smiled at her companions. “You two are too self-conscious. Keep in mind that I have the backing of the Academy, as well as my own house, which is a viscountcy. If the café staff kicks you out despite my influence, I’ll just lodge a complaint against them. I’m a registered adventurer too, remember—all Academy students are. And, if all else fails, it’s not like the two of you are entirely without status of your own—you were both originally nobles, weren’t you?”

Aria and Sophia gave her dubious looks.

“My house caused a problem that resulted in it essentially being destroyed,” Sophia finally said. “And even at the height of our power, we were only ever vassal knights.”

Miranda sighed. “There’s no need to abase yourself like that,” she told her sternly. “Nobles are nobles, whether they’re vassals or not.”

Hearing someone like Miranda say those words with such certainty made Sophia’s spirits lift a little. She relaxed enough to reach out and take her first sip of tea, which she was forced to conclude was delicious enough that it warranted its uncomfortably high price point.

“On an unrelated note...” Miranda said slowly, “when we meet up next, we’re all going to be working together as a team, but I don’t know much about any of you. Would you mind telling me what you’re capable of?”

“Sure,” Aria conceded. “You’ve got a good point. I act as one of the party’s vanguards, and my weapon of choice is a spear. As for my magical abilities... I’m still practicing.”

“As for me,” Sophia chimed in, “I can barely use any magic. I mostly fight with a battle-axe that’s been passed down through my family for generations, but beyond it, I’m also comfortable using hatchets and other small projectiles.”

Miranda gave a little *hmm*, her eyes alight with intrigue. “What about Novem?”

“She’s an *incredible* magician,” Aria replied. “She can pull off any spell you can imagine. I remember you being quite skilled, Miranda, but Novem’s probably even better than you. She’s always working hard too, since she’s our party’s magic specialist.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely!” Miranda replied, her face brightening. “She must be quite reliable. Personally, I consider myself more of a ‘jack-of-all-trades, master of none’ sort of person, if you know what I mean. With an emphasis on the last part.”

“D-Don’t say that,” Sophia hurriedly broke in. “Just being able to use magic is quite impressive.”

“That’s very kind of you, Sophia,” Miranda responded with a small smile, “but both of you can already use your Arts, right? Mine has yet to even manifest, so I must concede defeat to you two on that front at the very least. But, that aside...could you tell me about Lyle?”

Aria and Sophia exchanged a look.

How much should we tell her? Sophia wondered, seeing her thoughts reflected on Aria’s face.

Before either of the girls could come to a decision, though, Miranda laughed and said, “Oh, don’t worry! I already heard all about his Arts—he explained them to Professor Damian right in front of me. I’m more interested in the way he operates. I can’t help but worry that if I don’t know how he typically goes about things, I might get in his way somehow when he’s using his Arts. That would be just terrible...”

Relief broke out over Aria’s face. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. Lyle can do basically anything, and I don’t think you *could* do anything to bother him, really... No matter what happens, he ends up pulling things off all on his own in the end.”

Sophia nodded in agreement. *Lyle’s able to grasp the layout of the surrounding terrain all by himself, plus detect any enemies and traps located nearby. And that’s on top of having the highest level of combat abilities in our party. He’s even more powerful than Novem—she might be a specialized magician, but Lyle can use magic and fight in close combat. His spell mastery*

might be a bit lacking compared to her, but his sword skills more than make up for the difference.

Sophia sighed in admiration. “He really is amazing,” she assured Miranda. “Sometimes it seems like he’s not all the way there, mentally, but in times of crisis he’s calmer than anyone else. To tell the truth, there’s really no way we can measure up...”

A flicker of angry embarrassment ran across Aria’s face. Sophia watched as the other girl hung her head, frustrated. Sophia felt bad for her—it was so clear that Aria desperately wanted to be useful, and that she was filled with self-recrimination and anger every time she had to face the fact that she simply wasn’t.

Miranda leaned forward, catching both of their eyes. “Well, if that’s true, then how about you both just focus on doing your best at what you excel at? Leave the rest to him, and work on expanding your own capabilities. In my opinion, that’s your best path for moving forward.” Miranda smiled, but sighed a little at the same time. “I’m jealous of you two, you know. You both have such wonderful Arts...”

Faced with Miranda’s sweet, confident smile, both girls felt their hearts settle. *She’s right, they both thought. I just need to focus on my strengths.*

Once Novem and I returned to the inn that evening, I laid down in bed and sent my mind into the Jewel, just as my ancestors had instructed. Nearly the moment I appeared, the third head and the seventh head snatched me up and dragged me into one of the rooms of memory.

The doors for each of the rooms of memory were tucked behind the chairs of their respective owners, and the location within was created out of an embodiment of that ancestor’s memories. That meant that by entering one of the rooms, I was able to experience the exact same things my ancestors had at different times of their lives.

Today, it seemed I was visiting my grandfather, the seventh head’s room of memory. And now that I was there...

It's time to learn some Arts.

Every person's Art generally had three different stages, each one more powerful than the last. If a Gem was passed down through someone's family, it would inform each successive wielder of the names and uses of the first stages of all their ancestors' Arts, granting them the ability to utilize those powers.

But...that was *all* a Gem was able to do. If the user couldn't discover the names and applications of the other stages of their ancestor's Arts through other means, those abilities would forever be sealed off from them. In other words: should a family lose access to the knowledge they'd recorded about the second and third stages of a forefather's Art, the abilities themselves would be lost as well.

This wasn't the case, however, with my Gem, which had evolved into a Jewel. This transformation had resulted in the collected memories of the Jewel's previous wielders being revived within its confines, each man looking as they did back in their heydays. And not only did they carry all the knowledge I needed to learn each of their Arts, I could also learn the intricate details from them personally. Mind you, these versions of my ancestors were not true reincarnations of my forefathers—they were approximations, brought to life by memory alone.

Distracted by my thoughts, I didn't notice where we were until the third head whistled appreciatively. I blinked, realizing that the seventh head had decided to bring us to the version of our estate that lived within his memory—to the courtyard, to be precise. The massive form of the Walt family manor loomed in front of us, its construction ornamented with intricate carvings nearly everywhere you looked.

It's almost exactly as I remember it, I thought.

Having looked his fill, the third head said jovially, "Now, this is quite the extravagant place you've got here. In fact, it looks far too grand to be just an earl's house... You'd have to at least be a duke to warrant this level of finery." He gave the seventh head an amused look. "Was old grandpa doing his best to prepare for his grandson's eventual rise in status, perhaps?"

"By this point," the seventh head replied, "we had already decided that one

of us would marry someone with royal blood, which would take us from an earldom to a dukedom. We needed to give it a bit of time, though, so we didn't make our move during my son's generation. That said, either Lyle or one of his children would have undoubtedly become a duke. This was just me laying the groundwork."

All of this was news to me—I'd always lived within the Walt estate, so I'd thought that this was just what an earl's home was supposed to look like.

So I guess earls don't live on properties quite this large, huh? I thought, flushing slightly at my lack of knowledge.

"If I'm remembering right," the third head said slowly, "your wife came from the bloodline of the previous ruling house, right? I'm assuming that has something to do with all this."

"Yes, you're correct. And I have to admit that when it came to the manor, Zenoah did have quite a strong say. I didn't find any fault with her decisions, though—at this point, we'd expanded our territory to such an extent that no one would have even complained if we'd begun to call ourselves a dukedom or archdukedom."

From what I remembered of House Walt's history, the sixth head had been the culprit for our house's rapid expansion. He'd enthusiastically conquered the lands surrounding House Walt's territory, multiplying the size of the territory in a single generation. By the time he passed on his title as head, our house's lands were second in size only to the territory directly controlled by the king of Banseim.

The third head's brow furrowed as he crossed his arms. "Why didn't the royal family strike you down? It's clear that to them, House Walt would be more than trouble—they'd have thought of you as an impending threat to the throne. And that's not even mentioning that your wife was a survivor of a family that pulled a sword on that same royal house."

That's right, I remembered. My grandmother, Zenoah, came from a family that defied Banseim's royals.

If my memory served me correctly, an engagement had been forged between her and one of the members of the royal family in order to reconcile the two

houses' past disagreements, but had been broken off when my grandmother picked a fight during the process. Despite the problem of her unwieldy nature, though, my grandmother had still had valuable blood running through her veins that couldn't be wasted. A noble's blood was a magician's blood, after all. And so, the seventh head had ended up taking her as his bride instead.

Come to think of it, I mused, the third head's right. House Walt is so problematic, it wouldn't be shocking at all if the royal family decided to come eradicate us.

The seventh head let out a long sigh. "You can thank the sixth head for preventing that fate from coming to pass. During his reign, the Loyalist faction among the nobles did posit that our house was too dangerous to be left to our own devices. They were insisting that our territory be shaved away, or even confiscated from us entirely. Once my father caught wind of that, he stormed off and attacked the provincial nobles who were backing the loyalists at the time, leaving their houses in shambles. At the same time, he poured funds into the opposing Traditionalist faction. By the time he was done, he'd completely taken the wind out of those loyalist's sails."

The third head's eyes went wide with shock. "A-Are you serious?" he stammered. "You're saying the sixth head took down the loyalist court nobles?"

The seventh head shrugged. "It was a harsh time to live in. We were a country ruled by money and power. It wasn't like the sixth head's decisions engulfed our house in sunshine and rainbows either—we had to send our army off to battle multiple times, into wars that didn't offer us any sort of monetary gain."

What a terrible era, I thought, a tad horrified. I guess we should be thankful that the sixth head managed to overcome those tough times and achieve stability for House Walt, so the seventh head could take over where he left off.

The seventh head sighed. "But it seems we've strayed off topic."

Oh, that's right! I remembered. *The whole reason we came here was to talk about Arts.*

The third head nodded and locked eyes with the seventh head, and before I knew it, both men had stepped up to me and placed their hands on my shoulders. As one, they closed their eyes. Within seconds, my body was

enveloped in a gentle blue light, and knowledge began to surface within my mind. In a mere moment, I learned the names of both of their Arts and how to use them.

“So your Arts are called...Mind and Box?”

They both nodded, releasing their hold on me.

“That’s quite convenient,” the seventh head said, pleased. “To think that’s all it took to pass our Arts down. Though I guess in my time, images would just flow into my head from the Gem in a similar fashion...” He cleared his throat. “But let us move on. Lyle, allow me to show you the first stage of my Art—Box.”

The seventh head snapped his fingers—immediately, a magic circle manifested beneath our feet. It was big enough to surround all three of us and then some. As we watched, several guns slowly rose out of the circle and floated up into the air. The seventh head snatched one with a grin.

“You could say my Art has to do with space,” he explained. “Using it, you can store your tools away, along with nearly anything else that isn’t alive; everything will remain in the exact same condition as when they were placed inside. Incredible, isn’t it?”

The third head and I showed our appreciation with a smattering of applause.

The seventh head’s Art really is pretty amazing, I thought. I wonder why he held off teaching it to me until now.

“So...” the third head mused. “I’m guessing there’s some sort of negative about your Art, if you wouldn’t teach it to Lyle for so long.”

The seventh head nodded. “It’s nothing too complicated—using my Art just expends a great deal of mana. Lyle may have improved significantly since he first picked up the Jewel, but even right now I’d imagine he’d barely be able to pull it off.”

As we absorbed this, the seventh head snapped his fingers again. The guns he’d summoned were instantly sucked back into the magic circle, where they disappeared without a trace. The circle vanished along with them, leaving behind only the gun held in the seventh head’s hand.

The seventh head said I'd probably only just barely be able to pull it off, but my mana definitely increased after my Growth... I mused. It must have been by a pretty significant margin too, since I don't collapse every time my ancestors raise a ruckus anymore. And, speaking of Growth... I shivered in remembered horror. I never want to go through that ever again.

"Lyle," the seventh head said, knocking me from my thoughts. "Try using my Art."

I nodded. "All right."

Mimicking the seventh head, I tried snapping my finger. From what I'd understood of the Art when he'd transferred the knowledge to me, the snap was completely unnecessary, but something about it just felt right.

Within seconds, a magic circle had surfaced. However...it was quite a bit smaller than the one the seventh head had summoned.

The seventh head leaned forward, inspecting my work. "You might be able to fit a two-horse carriage in there," he calculated, "but definitely not a four-horse one."

The third head stooped down, examining my handiwork as well. "That's a lot smaller than yours was," he said to the seventh head. "Hmm. Do you think it'll grow bigger over time?"

"Yes," the seventh head replied. "The size will depend on his mana pool. Beyond that, everything looks good though—Lyle seems to have no issues on the technical side."

"Lyle's a natural when it comes to that," the third head replied. "So far, he's picked up all our Arts without any difficulty at all."

What does he mean by that? I thought, confused.

"Anyway, you've taught me all I need to know about your Art now, right?" I asked the seventh head, "What's wrong with me being able to use it, then?"

A conflicted look came over the seventh head's face. "First Meisel, now you..." he muttered. "Why are you all like this...?"

Meisel... I thought, something inside me clenching at the sound of my father's

name. My head drifted down toward my chest. *I don't think I'm ready to think about him or the rest of my family yet.*

Sadness flickered over both my ancestors' faces.

But then the seventh head shook himself from his thoughts, and the moment was gone. He turned to look at the third head. "It's your turn," the seventh head declared. "But, before that... Lyle, try erasing your magic circle."

I snapped my fingers again, and the circle vanished. At the exact moment of its disappearance, however, I felt a vast amount of mana leave my body in a rush. It was such a sudden depletion that I was hit with a level of exhaustion much higher than I could have ever imagined, and I collapsed to my knees. I flopped forward and gripped the ground with both hands, struggling to steady my breathing.

"That's dangerous all right," the third head said with a laugh. "You'll have to make a habit of checking that there are no enemies around before you use it, or you'll be too scared to even try, Lyle."

It's certainly a convenient ability, I thought, but with this high of a mana cost, I'll only be able to use it twice a day at most. And that's only if the initial use is first thing in the morning, and I'm able to devote the entire rest of my day to recovering my mana. Then I might be able to use it again at night.

If I was being realistic, using Box once per day would be my limit.

"All right, my turn!" the third head said, breaking into my thoughts. "I'll go ahead and give you a demonstration, since you're all tuckered out, Lyle. Now, to put it quite bluntly, my Art, Mind, is less user-friendly than the other Arts you've learned thus far."

The seventh head scoffed. "Lying scoundrel," he muttered.

I could tell from the look in the third head's eyes that he'd definitely heard him, but he chose to be diplomatic and continued on, ignoring the seventh head's insult. "If you use Mind on someone who is in an unweakened physical or mental state, most of the time they'll be able to resist you. In situations like that, my Art will be rendered completely useless. Therefore, the first condition of using my Art is to tire out your target; it's important to throw them off

psychologically. For instance...just like *you* are right now, Lyle.”

Something in the atmosphere shifted—the third head must have used his Art. I couldn’t tell what he’d done exactly, though.

“W-Wait... Third head? Seventh head?” I spun around, looking for them everywhere, but I couldn’t see hide nor hair of them.

Then, I realized someone else was standing in their place—Ceres. She giggled and took a step toward me, a sneer contorting her lips.

“Stop!” I gasped, my chest tight with fear. “Don’t... Don’t come any closer!”

Ceres burst out laughing at my feeble attempt to ward her off. “How unsightly you are,” she spat. “Look at you, crawling on the ground, squeezing out words in such a pathetic voice...” Her expression went ominously blank as she leaned forward, eyes locked on my face. “Lyle,” she said in a low, terrifying voice, “why don’t you just go and die already?”

I stared at her, frozen in horror, not even realizing that she’d drawn her trusty rapier until I saw it clutched in her hand. She thrust her arm forward, and the tip of the rapier cut through the air, straight toward my face, and then—

Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“H-Huh...?” I looked up, my eyes meeting the third head’s.

“Hey, there!” he said cheerfully. “Have a nice dream?”

I replied to this clear sarcasm with a creased brow and a very, very unimpressed scowl.

“I think you might have overdone it,” the seventh head told the third head, his face nearly as aghast as mine.

“It’s important to experience it for yourself once,” the third head replied with the utmost seriousness. “As you just saw, Lyle, my Art can be used to mess with people’s minds and cause them to hallucinate things that aren’t there. If you can get it to take effect, it’s quite the terrifying tool.” The third head’s laughing eyes fell on the seventh head. “Terrifying enough that a certain someone called me a scoundrel.”

The seventh head cleared his throat, then stepped forward and offered me a

hand. I took it gratefully, finally managing to climb back to my feet with his assistance.

“Mind is the most fearsome Art our family has ever produced,” the seventh head told the third head. “It’s proved useful several times throughout my life, but I always had the feeling that whoever manifested an ability of that sort must have been an outright villain. As it turns out, you’re just a blackhearted schemer.”

“You’re so mean,” the third head said with a chuckle. “Anyway, when it comes to Lyle, I don’t think he’ll use it for any funny business. That’s why I decided it’d be fine to go ahead and teach it to him. I can’t go around teaching an Art like mine to just anyone, you know—otherwise, someone would end up using it for no good.”

I raised my eyes to the third head’s face, pressing a hand to my still frantically pumping heart. “So you’ve been watching me all this time, trying to judge if I was suitable to teach?”

The third head nodded, as if such a thing wasn’t a big deal at all. “That’s right!” he agreed. “To be honest, I decided it would be fine to teach you a while back, but I just couldn’t find the right time. I thought this would be as good an opportunity as any. See, there’s this troublesome girl out there called Shannon, right...? I thought my Art just might come in handy dealing with that particular issue.”

So the third head thinks I’ll need to use his Art on Shannon? I thought, surprised. *But with what the fifth head explained earlier, she’ll just see through any illusions I can summon. What am I supposed to do with it, then?*

“Is there some different way to use your Art?” I asked the third head.

“Yeah,” he replied, “but I’m not entirely sure it’ll work. You see, my Art functions by emitting incredibly feeble waves of mana. It doesn’t have much of an effect on magic or most other Arts, but mental Arts are another story. It really messes them up. So, I just thought...Mind might just end up being your ace in the hole. You should try using it when the time comes—though it might not work at all.”

I mean, if possible, I’d rather not get myself into a situation where I have to

use it at all... I thought, wincing. And, anyways, using Mind means I'll have to come face-to-face with a certain glaring issue.

"So, um...how exactly am I supposed to exhaust or throw off my opponents?"

"Well, now," the third head said, folding his arms and grinning. "That all depends on you. You could physically wear them out, or surprise them, or drive them into a corner..."

The seventh head stared into my eyes, his face pleading. "Now you understand, don't you, Lyle? You see just how horrific his Art is? It can be incredibly convenient if you can master it, but it's a dangerous skill to have."

I nodded. I can certainly understand why the third head needed to get a good grasp of my personality before teaching me. It might not be the strongest Art, but if I manage to maneuver a situation so that all the conditions are met, it'll be a fearsomely powerful tool.

There was no better proof of my thoughts than the still racing beat of my own heart—even though plenty of time had passed since my run-in with that illusion of Ceres, I still hadn't managed to completely calm myself.

It was like she was actually there, standing right in front of me...

"There is one more way you can effectively use my Art," the third head said, and I did my best to cast my thoughts of Ceres aside. "Even if the enemy isn't weakened physically, and their mind isn't in disarray, you can still win them over by conversing with them."

"By...conversing with them?" I asked. "Why would that make your Art work on someone?"

The third head shrugged. "Who knows? All I can tell you is that the more you get someone talking, the more susceptible they are to Mind. I ran quite a few tests once upon a time, so you can trust me."

Wh-Who did you test it on?! I thought, horrified.

I wanted to speak up and demand some answers from him, but in the end I couldn't make myself do it. I was a bit too scared to know the answer.

Chapter 48: Shannon Circry

The day before Lyle and his party were planning to set off into the dungeon, Miranda checked Shannon into a hospital in Aramthurst. The staff gave Shannon her own private room, which was currently empty except for the two sisters.

The hospital had been the only choice Miranda could make to keep Shannon safe while she was gone, since she would likely be in the dungeon with Lyle's party for some time, and the girls were currently without a paid caretaker. Neither of them had any friends that could be trusted with Shannon's care either, so Miranda had figured the hospital was her safest bet.

"I'll be gone for a while, Shannon," Miranda said softly, "but I promise you I'll definitely come back. Please just wait for me here, and don't worry—I'll be just fine." Miranda paused, her eyes focused down on her hands as she carefully unpacked her younger sister's things, which they'd brought from their house. "And, just in case... If I don't return in two weeks, please ask someone from the hospital to get in contact with House Circry."

"Hey, sis..." Shannon asked, her voice low, "do you remember what you promised me?"

Miranda's body twitched, as though she'd been struck by a bolt of electricity. Slowly, almost mechanically, she turned toward Shannon, her eyes lifeless and her face blank. "I promised...to take care of them...in the dungeon..." Miranda replied haltingly. "But..."

Irritation prickled in Shannon's chest. *It's been a lot easier controlling sis recently, but it seems she's still putting up a bit of resistance. Should I be a bit more forceful with my adjustments? Right, then, how about I...?*

Shannon reached out with her power, manipulating the mana that surrounded Miranda as she saw fit. She wrapped invisible hands around Miranda's emotional spectrum, pushing and pulling until her older sister's feelings of anger and sadness grew stronger and stronger.

“You need to do a proper job,” Shannon crooned. “And anyways, isn’t that what you’ve been preparing for all this time?”

Miranda’s face abruptly contorted into an expression of complete and utter anguish, and she collapsed to her knees, clutching at her face. “I hate him,” she muttered heatedly through her grasping fingers. “I *detest* that man. I hate Lyle! I *loathe* him for betraying my feelings!”

Shannon smirked. *Well, her hatred of him is evident enough, at least.*

It wasn’t that the sight of Miranda shedding tears as she went mad with rage wasn’t upsetting to Shannon—her heart did ache for her elder sister. It was just that a part of her also...found it amusing. Reveled in it, a little, as payback for Miranda’s past betrayal.

The push and pull between the two sides of Shannon’s heart left her full of strange, muddled emotions. She began to laugh, her voice a little hysterical. “Oh, sis,” Shannon said, beaming, “you’re finally being honest with yourself. That’s right; you *hate* Lyle, don’t you? So...go get him.” Shannon pushed to her feet, and leaned over her sister with a manic grin. “First, I’ll experiment on those adventurers. Then, if all goes to plan, House Circry is next—daddy *and* Doris. Until finally...Ceres. And you’ll help me, won’t you, sis?”

By the time Shannon’s focus shifted from her plans back onto her elder sister, Miranda had stopped crying. A thin smile graced her lips, and she nodded in confirmation to Shannon’s question.

The smile that formed on Shannon’s face then, in that hospital room, was viler than any that had ever come before.

From my position on the hospital’s roof—quite far from the room where Miranda and Shannon now stood—I narrowed my eyes. I’d managed to observe the two girls with a combination of my ancestors’ Arts—I’d used Map and Search to observe their movements, and the second’s head Art, Field, to fill in the rest of the details. I was far enough away that Field just barely reached the room the Circry girls were staying in, but I’d sensed enough to know that the situation was far worse than I’d ever imagined.

“She’s not innocent at all...” I murmured.

A strong wind blew across the rooftop, which was currently devoid of anyone but me. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling, with the sun’s heat stabbing down mercilessly into my skin, but my shock over the scene I’d just observed overrode both sensations.

“What a foolish girl...” the fifth head muttered, clearly frustrated.

From what I’ve heard, the fifth head was a man who was apathetic to his own children, who preferred the company of his pet animals instead. But...is that really true? He seems awfully invested in Milleia’s two great-grandchildren...

“It appears that Shannon girl didn’t inherit my sister’s disposition at all,” the sixth head said in a disappointed voice. “To think she’d make a puppet out of her own sister...” He gave a great sigh. “What do we do now? We could always give the girl a good wallop and beat her into shape.”

A moment passed, and then the fifth head said coldly, “No. From what we’ve gathered, she was quite mistreated—she won’t give up on her revenge so easily. She’ll act on her feelings. Her abilities are still immature—she’d have noticed what Lyle was doing if they weren’t. We should take advantage of that and make our move now. Losing those eyes will be just as much for her sake as everyone else’s.”

I dropped to my haunches, hanging my head. “To be honest...I’m reluctant to do something so extreme. I don’t want to do it if I don’t have to.”

“That’s understandable,” the second head agreed. “Snatching the eyes of a child that young is a bit... And what if she turns out to be a good girl deep down?”

A heavy silence fell over the Jewel. The majority of us didn’t want to crush her eyes—me included. We all sank into our own heads, dawdling over our decision.

“Well, regardless of what we decide,” the fourth head finally said, “we can’t act right now. She’s in a hospital, and if you cause some kind of disturbance, you won’t be allowed into the dungeon.”

“We’ll need to be wary of Miranda while we’re in there,” the third head told

us all with a sigh. “But, about Shannon... She’s already worthy of pity after how horribly she’s been treated. Must we hurt her even more?”

From what Aria and Sophia told me, Shannon’s not so different from me, I remembered. She’s a girl who’s been shunned by her family, who grew up in a terribly isolated, narrow world. The only difference between us is that she’d always had her kind elder sister by her side. I blew out a sigh. I don’t need a little sister. I’d happily trade her for a nurturing elder sister like Miranda.

In the end, my thoughts brought me to one question: was there any way I could avoid crushing Shannon’s eyes?

I’ll take the time we’re going to stay in the dungeon to search for answers. And if I don’t come up with a way to rehabilitate her by the time we leave...I guess I’ll have to crush her eyes, just like my ancestors have instructed.

In the depths of Aramthurst’s dungeon, an adventurer grimaced, covering his mouth with one hand. His other held a lantern, which cast a faint light over the area in front of him.

“The hell is this?” he muttered.

The floor was littered with monsters, each in such a sorry state it hurt to look at them. Several had died with their faces twisted in despair. The strange thing was, whoever had done it hadn’t collected any of the monsters’ Demonic Stones or gathered any materials. They’d just left the monsters’ tattered bodies lying there, as if they’d massacred them for the fun of it.

The adventurer’s partner, who was a veteran, kneeled down, inspecting one of the monster’s injuries. “Looks like most of these wounds are crude tears,” he told the other man. “But...what’s this clean cross section here? It’s not magic...”

The adventurer with the lantern felt his stomach turn as he stared at the wound his partner had gestured toward. “It might be...one of *those people*, you know? It’s been happening a lot lately, from what I’ve heard. Rumor has it those noble kids have been coming down here to blow off steam. You don’t think they’re going to start targeting humans soon, do you?”

The veteran put a hand to his chin and groaned. “It may be one of them, but I

have to say I've never heard of an Academy student capable of something like this. It might be something—"

"H-Hey, let's just leave it at that!" the adventurer with the lantern broke in nervously. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Picking up the fear on his lantern-toting partner's face, the veteran quickly shuffled from monster to monster, gathering any materials that were still in sellable condition. He extracted the Demonic Stones too, before finally agreeing to be off on his way.

Had he gone even a bit farther, the veteran might have met the creature that shuffled forward across the dungeon's wall, its eight legs wriggling busily. Slowly, it descended from its threads onto the floor, revealing its gruesome form in the dim dungeon light.

A wide, twisted crescent of a mouth. A spiderlike torso, from which what appeared to be the upper half of a human body had sprouted.

This sinister entity raced through the dungeon on its eight churning legs, laughing maniacally. Whenever it came across a monster, it attacked it, chortling as it used its overwhelming might to rip the creature apart.

It lurked among the halls of Aramthurst's dungeon, lying in wait to attack everything that crossed its path...

Time passed, and the day of our departure soon arrived. We showed up at the Guild right as the sun rose, when the city was still wrapped in the dimness of early morning.

The first thing we did was submit our documents at the Guild, and after that was done we shifted to a spot near the Guild's entrance, where we waited for Professor Damian and Miranda to appear. Usually, we should have waited near the dungeon, but Miranda had said it would be more convenient this way.

We'd loaded the supplies we'd ordered from the food supply store into a pushcart we'd borrowed, which Sophia was pushing. She'd been a natural choice for the job, since she could just lighten the weight of the cart with her Art. Loaded down as it was, the pushcart looked quite heavy, but Sophia had

been maneuvering it around with no trouble whatsoever.

Clara was waiting with us at the door—she'd already been inside the Guild when we arrived. At the moment, she was squatting beside the entrance, reading a book she had clenched in one of her hands. Luckily, no dust came rushing through the door as people came in and out, as it was early enough in the day that the city gates were still closed. Without the passage of people over the dew-dropped ground, the soil remained undisturbed, with not a single dirt cloud in sight.

Despite the early hour, there were still plenty of adventurers visiting the Guild. They sent us some odd looks as they came in the door, but didn't pay us much mind—they had their own jobs to focus on.

Next to me, Aria spread out her arms and stretched out her back, her mouth opening wide in a yawn. She blinked sleepy eyes at the rest of us and moaned, "I wanted to sleep a bit mooore..."

"I warned you last night," Sophia rebuked her. "But you stayed awake after that anyway, didn't you?"

Aria's lips pressed together in a pout. "Well, uh, you see...I was too worked up to sleep. That theater performance Miranda took us to was too interesting!"

Looks like she's become fast friends with Miranda, I thought. She's certainly been taking Aria to all sorts of places around Aramthurst.

Sophia gave a little *hmph*. "Well, it was interesting, I must admit," she conceded.

So Sophia went too, huh? I thought.

Novem looked at the two girls with disappointment in her eyes. "You're growing lax," she reprimanded them with a sigh. "Keep it up and you're just asking to get injured. I do hope you can manage to get a grip on yourself before we enter the dungeon."

"They're treating this like they're going on a picnic," the second head spat in disgust. He was always harsh on Sophia and Aria, though I knew partly it was out of concern. "Weren't they a bit more serious just a short time ago? It doesn't seem like your earnings from the last dungeon have gotten them

conceited...so what is it?" He sighed. "I'm curious, but more importantly...those idiots might need to go through a bit of pain before..."

He trailed off, and I sunk into thought. *Maybe the fact that we conquered that dungeon in Darion and made a killing went to their heads*, I mused. *It was a pretty significant achievement for us to beat the boss monster and lay claim to the treasure it was guarding. But was that really enough to push them from confident to arrogant? The second head seems to think something else is afoot...*

But my ancestors didn't say anything more. They seemed to have much to think about, between Shannon and Miranda, Aria and Sophia, and me and Shannon.

Novem's eyes flickered away from the girls, focusing on something else. Clara seemed to notice something at the same time—she shut her book and stuffed it into her backpack, then hooked the massive bag over her shoulders as she climbed to her feet.

"Looks like they've arrived," Clara said shortly. "Professor Damian's dolls are as conspicuous as ever."

In the distance, I could hear the sound of metal rubbing against metal, and the heavy thumps of stomping feet. As the noise drew closer, the other adventurers in the room grew all astir, staring at four knights in full plate armor now walking through the Guild's front door. The knights were all nearly seven feet tall, with bags slung over their backs and weapons clenched in their hands.

And on one of their shoulders, a small man sat on a cushy pillow—Professor Damian. Once he took note of us, he waved a staff in greeting; it was longer than he was tall.

So these armored knights...are his dolls, I thought in awe.

"Hey, Lyle," the fifth head said all of a sudden. "Can you check out what's inside of them?"

It was a good idea, so I did. I activated Field, then used it to inspect what was in the interior portion of the armor. They were stuffed full of metal parts—there really was no human piloting them. The movements though...they were humanlike indeed.

“What I’d give to have one of those,” the fourth head muttered enviously.

Now that I’d inspected the dolls, I saw that Miranda was there too—she’d been a bit overshadowed by the looming forms of the knights calmly walking forward with all those bags. As evidenced by her peppy wave, it seemed she was energetic even this early in the morning.

That outfit’s different from what I’ve seen her in before, I realized. It looks easier to move around in. She might be a noble lady, but dressed like that, she really looks the part of an adventurer.

Novem seemed to share that sentiment. “There’s a dagger and a knife on her hip,” she murmured, looking impressed as she examined the other girl’s equipment. “Does that mean she can do more than magic?”

Hmm... I mused. I wonder what her fighting style is like.

I had more important things to think on at the moment though—I needed to tell the professor something, once the right time arose.

Once Professor Damian’s knights got close enough to us, they drew to a stop. “Now then,” the professor said grandly, looking down at us from his high perch, “let us head straight for the dungeon.” He yawned. “Though I must admit I don’t quite understand why I had to come retrieve you.”

It seems the professor hasn’t fully grasped our situation, I thought.

Miranda shot him a troubled look. “If they showed up without us, it would cause issues, professor.” Her eyes landed on all our supplies, and I saw her brow furrow slightly. “That’s...a lot of supplies,” she said slowly. “Are you sure you’ll be all right transporting all of that?”

“Why don’t we discuss this once we enter the dungeon,” I suggested. “That way we can speak where no one else is listening.”

Aramthurst’s dungeon was located in the middle of the city—though truly, that sentence should go the other way around. The dungeon had appeared before Aramthurst was even a speck on this territory’s desolate wasteland; its strange nature had brought people flocking to the area, and eventually the city

had literally been built around the dungeon.

In order to get there, we had to walk from the Guild—which was located along the city’s outer wall—to the heart of Aramthurst. As we made our way down the city’s streets, residents kept well clear of us.

It’s probably all the large bags and weapons we’re carrying, I thought idly.

“Usually, adventurers head to the dungeon when it’s darker,” Clara explained. “They avoid time slots when there are too many people out. Although that’s not necessarily the case with the Academy students.”

“Well, there’s a reason for that,” Miranda said, chuckling. “But, oh, here we are!”

As we’d been speaking, two armed men had walked up to our group. They ordered us to stop, and we obliged. Meanwhile, they looked over us with suspicious eyes.

These two must be some of Aramthurst’s soldiers, I thought.

“Are you challenging the dungeon?” one of them asked. “I’ve never seen any of you around these parts. I hope you’ve got your permit with you—we’ll have to confirm it with the Academy.”

We then handed over our permit, which the men accepted with judgmental expressions.

“Wait here,” they told us, and turned to head off to the Academy.

“What, you’re going to check *now*?” Aria demanded, clearly fed up with their attitude. “We have a permit; just let us through!”

The soldiers exchanged a look, then turned to us with grins on their faces. “If you want to pass that badly, make it worth our while,” one of them said. They both held out their hands. “Surely you’ve got some coins to spare. It might be afternoon by the time the Academy gets back to us... You really want to wait here till then? How about you use your brain and be clever about it, miss.”

Miranda sighed and showed her own permit. As soon as they saw it, the soldiers’ faces turned pale right before our eyes. “O-Oh!” one of them stammered. “You’re from a viscount house? M-My apologies! Please, by all

means, go ahead!”

Miranda didn’t relent though, even after she got her permit back. “I’m not going to waste time complaining about how you do things,” she said sternly, “but you should really check who you’re dealing with first.” She pointed at the professor, who was still perched on one of his dolls’ shoulders. “Also, this is—”

“Who are you, exactly?” the professor spat, cutting Miranda off. He was clearly livid. “What are you trying to accomplish by stealing away my valuable time?” He turned to the rest of us, his brow furrowed. “Don’t tell me *this* is the reason you had me come all the way to the Guild?”

Miranda nodded, shrugging. “That’s right, Professor Damian. I suspected we might meet some soldiers who would insist on confirming the authenticity of our permits.”

The two soldiers—already pale—began to shake in their boots the moment they heard the professor’s name. “M-My deepest apologies!” one of them cried, panicked. “I never imagined a professor would be with you—b-b-but this is part of our jobs!”

“I don’t care,” the professor declared coldly. It was clear the soldiers wouldn’t be weaseling out of this one. “You two got in my way, so you should prepare yourselves for what’s coming to you. Though, wait...I won’t remember your names or faces, so I guess I’ll just tell the headmaster to have all the soldiers take responsibility for your misdeeds. Good grief, the Guild is already putting up enough roadblocks. Why must the soldiers get in on it...?”

The soldiers’ eyes went watery as the professor continued to grumble under his breath, almost like they were about to cry. They looked pleadingly at Miranda, their eyes begging her to do something—anything.

But Miranda just shook her head and walked right past them. “Let’s go,” she called out over her shoulder. “By the look of things, we’ll most likely be stopped a few more times before we get there.”

That...didn’t sound like she was joking...

“Usually parties get stopped two or three times,” Clara concurred. “Though honestly, I didn’t think the soldiers would actually stop us after seeing the

professor's dolls. I was sure no one was that reckless."

Miranda smiled. "The soldiers here aren't the best, to say the least. They don't receive much training, and their salaries are low; it's no surprise their morale is low as well. I hope this incident at least gets them to develop a bit more self-awareness."

Sophia sent the two soldiers a tired stare from behind the cart she was pushing. They were fleeing as fast as their legs could take them.

"Is it all right for them to be harassing adventurers like this?" she asked. "I was under the impression that adventurers who can challenge dungeons are quite valuable to the region they belong to."

I nodded. *Since Aramthurst has a dungeon within its walls, the adventurers who challenge it should naturally be a precious resource to the city.*

But it seemed this wasn't true for Aramthurst—Clara shook her head in denial of Sophia's words. "The Academy has its own combat teams who keep the dungeon in order," she explained. "Adventurers are a backup—nothing more. Even if they were to vanish entirely, it would have little to no impact on the dungeon's management. The soldiers are well aware of this, so they're more than comfortable using their power to extort bribes from adventurers. That said, all it takes to get rid of them is a few silver coins, so most adventurers just pay the fee."

Aria's shoulder drooped. "This is kinda...well, *different* than how I imagined Aramthurst would be. I thought this city was a noble, earnest place."

I was of much the same mind. *Aramthurst really does have some shady inner politics for a place called "the Academic City,"* I thought.

After that, we had to use the professor's threats a few more times to scare away the soldiers who came to harass us. It wasn't too long until we finally reached the entrance to the dungeon, though. There were walls built up around the door to the inside, and I could see soldiers lingering around its walls, keeping watch. Groups of adventurers were lined up in a row that stretched down the path in front of us, apparently waiting for their turn to enter the

dungeon.

“There’s quite a number of people here,” Novem said, surprised. “I didn’t think there were this many adventurers in the city.”

Apparently deducing that we’d be waiting awhile, Clara plopped herself onto the ground and opened a book. Without looking up, she answered, “I’ve heard there are on average thirty parties in the dungeon at any given time. At peak hours, between fifty and sixty.”

Aria looked around and nodded. “Yeah, if there are this many of ’em outside, there might just be that many *inside*. How many parties are out here, anyway?”

Clara looked up, staring Aria straight in the face.

“Wh-What’s that look for?” Aria demanded, flustered.

“Nothing,” Clara said idly. “I just realized we have a very different sense of scale. Our party is on the incredibly small side—although it may appear that there are a lot of people around us, there are at most five parties.”

“You’re kidding!” Aria’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline.

I was also taken aback, and I had to take another look around. *No matter how I look at it, there have to be over a hundred adventurers here...*

Clara’s eyes returned to her book. “Well, most of these people are bag-carrying supporters. A party usually has ten-odd members for combat, and the same number of, if not slightly fewer, supporters. That’s how it works in Aramthurst.”

I stared at Clara. *There’s this many supporters in Aramthurst, and she’s seen as an especially prodigious one? Did we actually become friends with someone amazing?*

I was still lost in thought when our turn finally came around, and we at last passed through the entrance to the dungeon.

Chapter 49: Aramthurst's Dungeon

There were several reasons the dungeon beneath the city of Aramthurst was kept under careful management, with adventurers constantly plumbing its depths. The first was that it was an excellent place to gather materials and Demonic Stones, since monsters gathered within it in great abundance. The second was that the items that manifested within the dungeon's chests all had a high utility value. The third was that it had a structure that was easy to explore. The fourth and final reason was its uniqueness.

Aramthurst's dungeon was a variant that had never been seen before, which meant that beyond the value of the things contained within it, the dungeon *itself* was inherently valuable. It was the novelty of the dungeon's strangeness that had caused Aramthurst to be built in the first place—scholars had been unable to resist gathering round such a perplexing set of phenomena.

That said, the first thing I felt once entered Aramthurst's dungeon was the feeling that something was...off.

"Wh-What is...?" I muttered, freezing in my tracks.

The floor beneath my feet was ash-gray, its surface appearing slightly coarse. What was odd was that it was nearly perfectly flat—there were no conspicuous bulges or dents at all. The walls had much the same appearance, but when I reached out to touch them, they felt slick and smooth under the palm of my hand.

I glanced over at my party mates—Aria seemed taken aback, and Sophia's eyes were darting warily around the hall. Novem...well, she looked like she had something to say, but she held her silence. Clara and Miranda, on the other hand, didn't look nearly as disturbed as the other girls, most likely because they'd been in the dungeon before and had grown used to what I was currently feeling. Professor Damian didn't seem at all perturbed either.

"This is Aramthurst's dungeon," Miranda said, glancing at us. "It's nothing like you ever imagined, right?"

I nodded—I was still feeling just as taken aback as the moment I'd come through the dungeon's entrance.

Seeming a tad intrigued by our collective bafflement, Professor Damian began to speak at length. "Most dungeons construct themselves to appear as extensions of the natural world," he explained, "but this one based itself on a man-made structure instead. That's not unheard of; it does happen from time to time. But the incredible thing about Aramthurst's dungeon is that it modeled itself off of a structure that doesn't belong to our era, but of one long gone. Or, at least, that's what the scholars say. Amazingly, it appears that the ancients possessed far more advanced technology than we do in the current age. Which means the dungeon is chock-full of fascinating things to discover."

Oh, I realized. No wonder Aramthurst is a hub of knowledge and innovation—they've been compiling and reverse engineering the ancient technology found in this dungeon from the very beginning.

I ran my eyes over the room we were standing in a second time, my eyes falling on the pillars that seemed to hold up the dungeon's high ceilings—they were placed at regular intervals around the area in front of us.

It looks like this whole place is made up of vast hallways, I mused.

The strangest thing I'd seen so far was located a little farther ahead, above a doorway. There was this lantern-like light-emitting...*thingamajig*...plastered on the wall. It was shaped like a long, rectangular box, and it glowed white and green, with a symbol on it that seemed to depict a person entering a door. Whatever it was, it didn't appear to be made of glass.

Beyond the thing above the door, there were other sources of light too—slender tubes that emitted a white light had been hung from the ceiling periodically throughout the space. Unfortunately, they didn't quite manage to illuminate the entire hallway before us.

Having seen enough for the moment, I paused my observations of the rest of the area and turned my attention back to the material making up the walls and the floor we stood on. I couldn't help but think that it wasn't made of stone—something just felt odd about it.

"This isn't stone, is it?" I asked idly, running my hand over the wall again.

Alas, no one answered me, so I sunk into thought instead. *I've never felt anything that had this kind of texture before...* I mused, glancing back up at the rest of the dungeon again. *I don't really know how to describe this place other than...peculiar.*

I glanced over at Clara, feeling a bit at a loss, only to see her press her right hand against a spot on her artificial left arm. There was a delightful *kshik* sound as a part of it opened up, revealing three metal rods inside.

That's...kinda cool, I thought, my interest piqued.

"That prosthetic's pretty amazing isn't it?" the third head burst out as I stared at the mechanism. He sounded just as intrigued as I was. "There must be some secret behind how it can move so naturally."

The second head let out an intrigued hum of his own. "We'd have been able to help out all the poor folks who lost their limbs if we'd had those back in my day," he mused.

Clara glanced up from whatever she was doing and caught me staring. A flicker of sadness crossed her face and she drew into herself, turning away. "Please don't stare," she pleaded, voice flat. "It's...bothersome."

I averted my eyes, and she snapped the portion of her prosthetic arm she'd opened back shut. Then she lifted her palm into the air and murmured, "Light..."

Several light-emitting orbs manifested in the air above her palm. They rose, positioning themselves over our heads so they would light up our general vicinity.

"Wow," Sophia marveled. She lifted her head, her mouth agape as she observed Clara's spell.

I shared Sophia's sentiment wholeheartedly—I could use magic to light up the majority of an area, but it wouldn't be nearly as bright as Clara's orbs. I wasn't skilled enough to ensure that my light reached every nook and cranny of a room either.

"There are three separate Arts engraved into my arm," Clara explained, somewhat bashfully. "They're carved into the interchangeable rarium rods that

are stored inside the mechanism. The first provides a light source, the second lights fires, and the third produces water. I can adjust the water to any temperature you want—though none of it is potable.”

“I’d love to have one of those,” I said honestly.

Clara pressed up her glasses, correcting their positioning. “Just be grateful that you still have an arm made up of your own flesh and blood,” she said firmly. “That’s what’s best.”

I had no way to refute that, so I just fell silent. My gaze flickered over to the form of the professor, who was standing nearby. He seemed to have gone rigid with some kind of realization.

“Now hold on a second...” he cried out, staring at Clara’s prosthetic arm. “Am I the one who made that?”

Why does he sound genuinely curious about that?! I thought in exasperation.

Clara inclined her head to the professor in thanks. “Indeed,” she affirmed. “Thank you for what you did for me. Thanks to you, I can still work using my new left arm. But...you didn’t remember that you made it until now?”

“Nope,” the professor replied. “I just thought it looked cool, then a blueprint popped into my head. Going off that, I realized it was probably one of my inventions.”

An odd look of relief passed over the professor’s face, as if he was grateful that he’d managed to recall his part in the arm’s creation at all.

Miranda sighed. “Come on, we need to start moving, or the next party will run straight into us. Oh, and Lyle—wasn’t there something you wanted to tell us before we set out?”

Oh, right, I remembered.

I immediately used Map and Search, checking the layout that popped up in my head for any enemies and keeping an eye on the movements of nearby adventurers. Additionally, I scouted out the shortest possible route to the next floor.

“This way,” I finally said, gesturing in the direction I’d decided to go. “Let’s get

a move on. For now, we should plan to try and avoid getting into battles and focus on making our way as deep into the dungeon as possible.”

Once I started walking, everyone else followed along behind. The shining orbs above our heads floated along with us as well.

Those orbs really are quite convenient, I mused, pouting a little. *Whenever I use light magic, it'll only stay stationary...*

We arrived at the entrance to the third floor of the dungeon not too much later, having successfully avoided bumping into any monsters or any of the other groups of adventurers working within its halls.

The sight of the downward ramp seemed to fill Sophia with relief. “I’m glad it’s just a gentle slope instead of stairs,” she said with a happy sigh. “I’d have to lift the cart up otherwise.”

“There are no stairs in this dungeon,” Clara informed her. “All downward paths are slopes like this one. They also have a decent breadth to them—the problem appears on the journey back up, due to the length of the slopes.”

Pushing heavy supplies up multiple long ramps certainly does sound like a grueling task...

Aria nodded, quickly catching onto Clara’s implication. “We’ll have more baggage going up than coming down, now that I think of it,” she said. “Since we’ll have to carry all the Demonic Stones and materials back with us.” She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I see, now—*that’s* why you need supporters.”

I nodded. *It’s absolutely essential to have someone to carry the party’s supplies in a dungeon like this.*

As we’d been chatting, we’d reached the third floor, and I used the Arts I’d activated to search for what room to go in next. Within a few seconds, I’d found a suitable place to go—a room devoid of both monsters and adventurers.

I walked up to the room’s door and pulled it open, glancing inside.

“I must admit, I find your methods fascinating,” Miranda said. I looked over my shoulder and found her watching me with impressed eyes. “All my

instructors have taught me that you should always be on your guard when entering a room. I've never seen anyone open a door with such lack of care."

Oh, I thought as the rest of our party filed into the room, I guess that makes sense. Since most other adventurers can't use Arts like Map and Search, it's probably unimaginable to feel so at ease opening a door.

Once we were all inside, Clara took a quick stock of everyone and then extinguished her initial light magic. The orbs, which had been starting to peter out, vanished, replaced by a fresh batch when Clara recast her spell.

With the lights shining down on us once again, I commented, "Actually, I learned a new Art—if I used it now, I'd be able to store the majority of our supplies elsewhere."

Novem's eyes jerked to my face, her pupils dialed wide for a moment before her face regained its normal tranquil expression. "Wonderfully done, milord," she told me. "I suppose it must be Lord Brod's Art?"

I nodded, but decided to forgo an explanation. That info had little meaning to the other members of our party anyway.

The seventh head, however, didn't seem very appreciative of this choice. "You can brag a little bit about your old grandpa, you know," he said pitifully, his voice wavering as it filtered into my head from the Jewel. "I mean, don't you think he was quite an amazing person?"

I rolled my eyes and ignored him. *Regardless of how amazing you are, seventh head, I thought, diving into a long explanation serves no purpose.*

"To be clear," I continued, "after I use it once, it will be a while before I can use it again. Whether I'm putting something in or taking it out, I can only access my storage once per day. We'll have to plan around not having access to anything stored until tomorrow night."

Once I'd finished speaking, Clara gave me a look like there was something on the tip of her tongue, but Professor Damian beat her to the punch.

"I called you a dungeon specialist a while back, and it seems like I was right," he said. "Well, maybe not *entirely*—you're more of an expert in general. Regardless, it seems I was correct in my decision to let you handle this

expedition.”

A short while later, we’d managed to section off two days’ worth of our supplies and piled them up together. That done, I then snapped my fingers, triggering the seventh head’s Art, Box.

As the magic circle I’d summoned appeared on the ground beneath me, I saw Novem’s head tilt, as if she was puzzled by my gesture. I shook the thought off, though, and turned back to the others, instructing them to start placing all of our remaining supplies onto the circle.

Sophia timidly stepped forward onto it with her loaded pushcart and then immediately jumped backward—it was honestly kind of cute.

Aria was quick to laugh at Sophia’s nervousness. “What are you so scared for?” she demanded, snorting.

Sophia’s face flushed. “I-I’m not scared!”

I had to hold back a smile as I waited for everyone else to place all the other supplies we’d deemed unnecessary for the moment atop the circle. As soon as they were done, I snapped my fingers again and the supplies sank into the ground, sucked away. As soon as all the supplies had vanished, the circle faded away as well.

Everyone gave me rather impressed looks, but I wasn’t doing too well—I could feel myself teetering unsteadily on my feet, and when I took a step forward, I stumbled over myself.

“I guess I’m not entirely used to using it yet,” I said helplessly.

Before I could fall, someone came over to support me, keeping me steady on my feet. I thought it was Novem at first—it almost always was—but when I looked up, I was surprised to see Miranda’s face instead.

“Are you all right?” she asked, voice concerned. “You look absolutely exhausted.”

I hadn’t been prepared to be so close to Miranda out of nowhere like this—she felt different against me than Novem normally did, and smelled different

too.

“W-Well this is the downside to using the A-Art,” I stammered, feeling a bit bashful all of a sudden. “I won’t be able to do pretty much anything now until I’ve gotten a bit of rest.”

I glanced over at Novem, who had moved to my side as well. She was giving me a very troubled look. I sent her a smile and insisted I was all right, and after a moment she sighed and nodded, seeming to accept I was telling the truth.

“Aria, Sophia,” Novem said, turning toward the others. “Can you two keep watch?”

“Yeah, why not?” Aria said, nodding in agreement.

Sophia gave Novem a confident smile. “Just leave it to me,” she replied.

That decided, I decided to head over to one of the walls of the room with Miranda’s help. The wall was too slick for me to successfully lean against in a standing position—my back slid downward almost immediately, until I collapsed in an ungainly sit.

As I relaxed, Professor Damian had his dolls lie down, which he informed us was a less mana-demanding position than keeping them standing. That way he could rest a bit as well.

Clara, meanwhile, was testing out the feeling of her backpack now that it had been considerably lightened.

“You really are incredible, Lyle,” Miranda commented from where she stood next to me. “It appears Aria and the others didn’t even know about that Art you just used.”

I glanced up at her, planning on playing it off with a smile, but the seriousness of her expression brought me up short.

I should give her an actual explanation, I thought with a sigh.

“The truth is, I couldn’t have activated it before now even if I’d really wanted to,” I told her. “As you can see, I still have to rest after every use.”

There, I told her the truth.

Miranda nodded a few times, taking in my words. “Do you have the ability to use even *more* Arts they don’t know about, then?” she asked, her eyes falling to the Jewel.

Huh, I thought. She’s more invested in this than I would have expected.

Before I could answer, Novem stepped between us. “Miranda, you know it’s bad manners to ask something like that.”

Novem was right—it was considered common courtesy to refrain from asking too many questions about a person’s Arts.

“I’m sorry,” Miranda said softly to Novem. She gave a helpless little shrug. “I just asked without thinking.” Miranda turned to me and gave me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry to you as well, Lyle.”

With that, Miranda seemed to decide it was best she depart from the conversation, and she left to go chat with Aria. I waved her off, then turned to Novem.

“I’m not that bothered by her questions,” I said lightly.

Novem’s face contorted.

Oops, I thought, wincing. Apparently that’s not a good enough excuse.

“Even if we choose to disregard her breach of social conduct,” Novem said sternly, “you need to be more self-aware, milord. That blue Gem is an heirloom of House Walt. It holds the priceless Arts manifested by all of House Walt’s leaders throughout history. Please do not spread that information so easily.”

Looks like I made her pretty angry... I thought, quickly apologizing to her.

She sighed. “Please, just be a bit more careful next time,” she pleaded. Then, all of a sudden her face changed. She went from looking like a parent scolding an unruly child to the epitome of seriousness. “Also...I noticed that you snapped your finger when you used Lord Brod’s Art. I’m not sure if you know, but the gesture is meaningless. It was simply Lord Brod’s habit. Did you see it somewhere before?”

Oh, that’s not good at all... I paused for a moment, trying to scrape up a good response. Thankfully, the answer came to me quickly.

When the seventh head had been alive, he had doted quite heavily on his grandson—in other words, me. It wouldn't have been strange at all for him to brag to his beloved grandson about his Art. I had no memories of the time before I turned ten, but that didn't mean it had never happened—there was a high chance I'd seen him perform his Art and use that gesture.

"Yes, I actually saw grandfather use that gesture when he showed me his Art when I was younger. I think he was bragging, and wanted me to be proud of what he could do. Is there...something wrong with me doing it too?"

"Is that so?" Novem asked, not looking fully convinced. "Lord Brod *did* dote on you when you were younger..."

Well, she might not completely believe me, but at least she's trying to convince herself, I thought with an inward sigh of relief.

I relaxed even further when Novem sat down beside me, appearing to let her suspicions go. She passed me a sweet treat she'd apparently brought with her.

"Eating sweets is a good way to stave off tiredness, milord," she informed me.

I took the treat from her with a smile. *Novem always serves me so briskly and efficiently,* I thought, filled with appreciation. *That's one thing that has never changed.*

My ancestors didn't seem to be feeling as carefree as I did, though.

"Did I really use my Art in front of Novem?" the seventh head muttered from inside the Jewel. He sounded extremely doubtful. "I don't remember ever showing it to Lyle either..."

"You must have shown it at one point," the third head said. "Maybe old grandpa just wanted to show off in front of the kids. It's possible you did it after you passed on the Jewel—it seems all of our memories are pretty vague once we gave it up. Well, except for me." The third head gave a bitter laugh. "I died with it, so I remember everything."

"You're unique in that way," the fourth head said, sighing. "But you're right—I don't have any memories after I passed the Jewel on to the next generation. The seventh head must have shown Novem his Art at some point after he gave the Jewel away."

The seventh head shook his head. “I don’t buy it—I might have done something like that in my heyday, but after I got old, the rapid mana expenditure from that Art started to do a real number on me. I can’t imagine I’d go that far just to show off.”

“Oh, or maybe Novem heard about the gesture from her father or grandfather,” the sixth head suggested. “They fought with you out on the battlefield, right? They must have seen you use it.”

“Maybe...” the seventh head reluctantly conceded.

That seems the most likely answer, to me at least, I thought.

“I don’t know...” the fifth head cut in. “Seeing how you are around Lyle, I can easily picture you showing off your Art to him even if you had to push yourself to do it.”

He was right—it wasn’t hard at all to imagine my grandfather overdoing it in front of me. The image brought a small chuckle to my lips, which made Novem turn around and look at me funny.

“Milord?” she asked, clearly curious.

“Ah, no, it’s...” I waved her off. “It’s nothing.”

Acting like nothing had happened, I focused on eating the treat she’d given me. With each bite, sweetness spread across my taste buds, the flavor flooding into my stomach once I swallowed.

Sure enough, within a few short minutes, I really did start feeling a bit better.

After a somewhat long break, we’d gotten all our things together and got back on the move. At the moment, we were hanging back, observing a group of monsters that was blocking our path forward.

After a moment of consideration, I had Clara snuff out her light orbs, then slunk forward toward the crossroads where the monsters stood. As I drew closer, I could see there were three goblins, who were standing around an orc outfitted in metal armor. They were clearly lit up by a light that hung from the ceiling above them.

Looks like they're hanging around, waiting for their prey to come to them, I thought.

Luckily, the area where my party lingered was dark, so they hadn't yet picked up on our presence.

"Are they seriously trying to launch an ambush from beneath that light?" the second head asked, unable to hold back his laughter. "They're practically asking to be sniped."

I whispered to the others that they should wait, then pulled out my bow. I carefully extracted an arrow from the special cylindrical quiver at my waist as well.

Looking at the enchanted arrow I pulled out, Professor Damian whispered, "That's an arrow where the enchantment didn't take right, isn't it? I know students often make enchanted arrows as a side job; I've heard they sell them for dirt cheap when they fail. But you think those are still useful?"

I nodded. "Though they're full of problems, admittedly." I turned to Novem and Aria. "Novem, start preparing a spell with a wide area of effect the moment I fire the arrow. Aria, take care of the monsters that still manage to get through."

Novem nodded, and Aria replied by giving her spear a strong grip.

"Take aim slowly," the second head advised. "You can do it."

I took a deep breath and drew the bow back, the second head's words putting me at ease. My heart was beating so loud in my ears that it drowned out all the other background noise surrounding me. All at once, I released my fingers from the bow string, and the arrow shot forward to the head of the orc.

It didn't pierce the orc's helmet—rather, it exploded on impact. A large dent appeared in the metal encasing the orc's head, and blood began to pour down the monster's neck as it flew backward, as if struck by a strong punch. Meanwhile, the goblins raised their weapons and scanned their surroundings, trying to locate the source of the attack.

Novem's silver rarium staff had begun to let off a glow as soon as she started to speak the incantation for her spell, which the goblins quickly noticed. They

started sprinting toward us.

I tucked away my bow, then placed my hand on the hilt of my saber.

“Fire Cannon,” Novem said, her spell complete.

I pulled my saber from its sheath as a large orb of fire shot forward at high speed, flying down the angular passageway toward the goblins. It hit the closest one in seconds, bursting upon impact. Fire scattered everywhere, blanketing everything in the vicinity.

All three of the goblins ended up wrapped in flames. They flailed around in agony, then collapsed to the ground and fell still. The fire died alongside them.

Once I’d confirmed they were all really dead, I turned my focus to observing the situation around us. “There are enemies crawling along the walls,” I informed my party. “Insect types, perhaps.”

Clara quickly shot up a light source and advised me, “These will be troublesome foes, Lyle. The insect monsters that appear on this floor are centipedes... They’re as large as a grown man, and their poison can be a hassle to deal with.”

They must have been alerted to our presence by the battle, I mused, scanning the Map in my head. *Looks like...there are three of them in total.*

“They’re coming from straight ahead,” I called out to the rest of my party. “There’s three of them.”

Upon hearing that, Professor Damian positioned three of his dolls in front of us. “How wonderful,” he declared, lightly pushing up his glasses. “Why don’t you let me use this as a chance to show my worth? Oh—but if they slip past me, they’re your problem.”

I watched the three dolls from behind, enthralled as they braced themselves for what was to come. They stood in a row, each of them wielding a different type of weapon. Eventually, though, I forced my focus back onto the Map in my head, measuring the distance between the enemy and us until...

“They’re here!”

I focused back on what was in front of me, catching sight of three massive

centipedes crawling toward us along the wall. Professor Damian must have seen them too, since the trio of armed dolls immediately rushed out to meet them.

The first doll used a spear to pierce through a centipede's head, pinning it to the wall. The second took advantage of another of the centipede's forward momentum to chop it in half with an axe. The third doll, which was wielding a mace, smashed its weapon straight through the last centipede's body.

To my horror, despite the second centipede having lost half its body, it continued skittering toward us.

I was about to step out to fight it, Sophia at my side, when three knives went flying between us—they all thunked home in the centipede's head. The monster collapsed to the floor, writhing, and then eventually stopped moving entirely.

I turned around, trying to figure out who'd thrown the knives, only to see Miranda standing right behind me. "I didn't expect that," I told her, smiling slightly.

Miranda shrugged. "I figured that after seeing me accomplish a throw like that, you'd be able to see my level of skill with my blades. I *can* use magic, but I'm quite good at this too."

"You're pretty good!" Aria chimed in, managing to praise Miranda even as shocked as she still was. "But, um...please say something before you throw them next time."

"Sorry," Miranda apologized. "I'll keep that in mind."

I scanned the area again, making sure we were completely clear of monsters, as Clara pulled on a pair of gloves. She walked over to the monsters we'd slain, confirming each one was dead before she started collecting their Demonic Stones and various materials.

We should be good for now, I thought. I don't sense any more enemies approaching us.

Novem and Miranda were still on their guard—Novem was surveying the path ahead of us, while Miranda was keeping an eye on the path behind. Sophia and

Aria, on the other hand, weren't nearly as concerned. They were chatting with each other about the battle.

"Professor Damian and Miranda are quite skilled," Sophia commented.

Aria nodded. "I'll say!" she agreed. "There wasn't even a chance for me to step in."

I glanced over at Professor Damian—he was pulling out the spear one of his dolls had used to kill the first centipede. The doll had struck with such force that the spear was stuck in the dungeon's wall.

My eyebrows went up when the professor finally pulled the spear loose. Freed of the foreign object that had sliced into it, the wall had immediately begun to restore itself. It was like watching time rewind.

By the time the wall had returned to normal, Clara had finished collecting everything from the monsters' bodies. She walked over to me, tallying off the things she'd gathered as soon as I was within hearing distance.

"There were seven Demonic Stones," she said. "And these are the materials in sellable condition. Will we be leaving the metal equipment behind?"

She showed me the iron equipment that the orc and the goblins had been using. They looked quite heavy.

"I see..." the fourth head said, in a tone that indicated he understood what Clara was truly asking. "If you take that equipment, they'll just end up getting in the way farther on. I'd recommend leaving it all behind except the Stones, Lyle."

That advice seemed sensible enough to me, so I passed the message on to Clara. Once that was settled, I turned to the rest of the party and announced that it was time to continue forward on our journey.

As we walked, Clara struck up a conversation with me. "That's just the professor for you," she said, referring to his impressive showing during the battle. "It's clear he's not just called the Dollmaster for show. Miranda's knife skills weren't so bad either. I wonder where she cultivated that technique?"

Miranda was certainly more competent than I'd expected for a student of the

Academy. Clara had obviously noticed as well—she seemed curious about her.

I should ask Miranda about that later, I decided.

It wasn't long before we spotted the ramp leading down to the fifth floor. We made our way down it, only to find a strange device waiting for us as soon as we walked inside.

What is this thing? I wondered, taken aback.

In front of me was a metal-pleated door that appeared to open upwards. If I peered inside, I could see a system of wires that seemed to be moving.

Taking in our confused expressions, a look of realization moved over Clara's face. "Oh, is this a first for you guys?" she asked. "This is a floor-transfer device that exists throughout Aramthurst's dungeon." Clara pointed at a spot above the entrance to the peculiar space. "There's a meter there—do you see the number on it? That shows what floor the transfer device is on at any given moment. You can use it to go freely to any floor between the fifth and twenty-fifth."

"Really?" Aria asked, delighted. "Then we can easily skip straight to floor twenty-five, can't we?"

Clara shook her head. "This device can only go to floors that everyone onboard has previously reached. In short, those entering the dungeon for the first time must make their way through the floors on their own feet before they can make use of the device."

"It's a real pain," the professor grumbled. "But, oh well, I'm sure you'll all get us to the twenty-fifth floor soon enough."

"I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up," Aria groaned, her shoulders drooping.

"Just try and keep in mind how easy it'll be getting back out of the dungeon," Novem suggested.

Sophia, at least, seems relieved at that thought, I noticed, smiling a little. *And no wonder—it's tiresome just imagining going down forty whole floors, let alone having to climb back up the same distance. And that's not even taking into*

consideration how many more supplies we'd be carrying the second time around.

As if spurred by the interest over the floor-transfer device, Clara launched into a bout of additional facts. "I won't say that all large-scale dungeons are the same," she explained, "but many of them have mechanisms that make them easier to explore. The most widely agreed upon theory at the moment is that these mechanisms exist to lure stronger adventurers to harsher, deeper locations to more reliably get rid of them."

Perhaps she actually likes teaching people things? I thought as I listened. *I didn't expect that, given her demeanor.*

I glanced over at the number above the device—it seemed someone was using it at the moment, as the number had once been at twelve and was now decreasing.

A dungeon that prepares a convenient device to lure adventurers farther in, huh? I mused. *It almost sounds like the dungeon wants someone to conquer it.*

"That's really something," the sixth head commented thoughtfully, his voice filtering out from the Jewel. "Back in my day, we used to just conquer all the dungeons as soon as they appeared. We never ran across any contraptions like that."

This did not surprise me. As I knew intimately, my ancestors had a habit of launching into action the moment they heard a dungeon existed, stumbling over each other in their mad rush to be the first to challenge its depths. Back in the olden days, that had actually been the correct decision—the technology needed to maintain a dungeon safely hadn't existed at that time, so eradicating them was the best course of action. That said...

I have a strange feeling that even with the correct technology, they would still just clear every dungeon they heard of immediately...

"How much money do you think this dungeon's worth?" the fourth head asked. "Oh, it's gonna keep me up at night... I mean, think of how *deep* this dungeon is! Just imagine all the treasure you'd get if you conquered it!"

They just can't help themselves, I thought with an inward sigh. *Still, they*

better give it up—this dungeon's under the management of the Academic City of Aramthurst. It's strictly prohibited to even try to clear it.

There were probably much the same rules in other places that managed dungeons as well. If that was true, essentially all large-scale dungeons would be impossible to conquer—not because of their depth or their size, but for the sake of human convenience.

I wonder which is deeper—the largest dungeon of them all, or the depths of human greed...

Novem placed a hand on my shoulder, jerking me from my thoughts. “We should be off, milord,” she said softly.

I sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

The same night that Lyle and his party were plumbing the depths of Aramthurst’s dungeon for the first time, Shannon escaped from her hospital room and went on a walk.

She’d only been wandering around a short time when she sensed a presence approaching her direction; she quickly found a place to hide, then warily peeked out in order to confirm who it was.

Even though she was blind, Shannon could tell from the shifting light that the nurse was carrying something in her hand that gave off a glow.

It's probably one of the night nurses doing their rounds, Shannon decided.

“Oh, I can’t *stand* this,” Shannon heard the nurse mutter. “Let’s please just finish up and go home already...”

Shannon could tell just from the hesitant sounds of the woman’s footsteps that she was terrified of the dark. Shannon couldn’t help but find such a fear quite strange—she lived in near complete darkness every day, after all. Even when she activated her ability to see mana, the world around her still primarily consisted of blackness; all her mana vision did was layer a few glowing dots on top of it.

Curious, Shannon decided to inspect the nurse’s mana. What she saw made

her eyes narrow.

That's the woman who stole the candy from my room this morning! she thought, anger rushing through her. How dare she do that, just because she thought I wouldn't see it!

Shannon might not have been able to see, but she could hear plenty well. She could sense at least some of her surroundings through sounds and vibrations. *That's* how she'd known the nurse had taken her favorite candy, and her suspicions had only been confirmed when she'd checked for it once the nurse had gone.

Shannon smirked, a vindictive glee running through her. She took hold of the nurse's mana, adjusting its fluctuations in order to stimulate her feelings of fear. Soon enough, the woman was shaking in her boots.

"Wh-What's going on?! I...I heard something over there..."

Shannon giggled to herself. *Look how pitiful she is—that nurse's so afraid she's experiencing auditory hallucinations! Even the slight sway of a curtain blowing in the wind has her on edge.*

Enjoying every second of the nurse's fear, Shannon reached out and manipulated the mana around herself, blurring the contours of her body.

Grinning evilly, Shannon shuffled up behind the nurse, calling out, "Hey, sis... Let's play..."

"Huh?!" The nurse whirled around, her face contorting in fear. "No... NOOOOOOOO!!!"

Screaming in horror, the nurse spun around and ran off as fast as she could. Her sheer terror made her movements ungainly though, and her legs tangled beneath her. She tripped over herself, collapsing roughly to the floor. But still, her fear consumed her—she crawled away on hands and knees, as if unable to do anything but flee.

At first, Shannon was startled, but within a few seconds, she was bent over, holding her stomach in laughter. "That's what you get for messing with my sweets," she cackled. "Still...I wonder what she saw when she looked at me..."

All Shannon had done was make herself a bit harder to see and stimulate the nurse's sense of fear. But for the nurse to have that intense of a reaction...Shannon must have looked like something from the world beyond.

Regardless, Shannon felt heartily satisfied with the results of her mischief. She decided to return to her room. She took a few steps forward, then paused, her glowing eyes turning toward the ceiling.

"Come to think of it...I wonder if sis is doing all right. I hope she comes back soon..."

With that, Shannon giggled once again, disappearing into the darkness.

Several hours later, my party and I had made our way to the fourteenth floor of Aramthurst's dungeon. At the moment, I was doing recon, crouching outside of a dark room where a bonfire burned.

A group of reptilian demi-humans—also known as lizardmen—huddled around the fire. They had rough, scaly skin and physical prowess that went far beyond a human's. As far as their height, I wouldn't have gone quite so far as to say they were over ten feet tall, but they were certainly large enough.

A single swing of one of those axes in their hands would probably cut straight through a knight, even if they were wearing plate armor, I thought with a shiver.

One of them would have been plenty to deal with, but there were five of them around the fire; they were sturdy warriors too, each of them equipped with sets of metal armor. A sixth lizardman stood lookout by the entrance to the room as well.

Unlike those orcs and goblins we fought on the upper levels, these guys seem to have their wits about them, I thought, watching as they slung back pints of ale. *They probably snatched that from other adventurers they came across...*

Having gathered all the details I could, I retreated with a sigh, heading over to where my comrades were waiting for me. I explained what I'd seen, then jumped into a discussion about our plan of attack.

Clara's sleepy-looking eyes had narrowed after hearing the details, and she

was the first to chime in with her thoughts. “That party of lizardmen is notorious—they’re not going to be easy to deal with. They camp out around the entrance to floor fifteen, and I’ve heard a number of parties have been wiped out by them. From what you saw, it seems their numbers have gone up too.”

It was easy to understand why the lizardmen lingered here in particular—the stronger adventurers wouldn’t enter the fourteenth floor, as they would use the floor-transfer device to start at a deeper location. Thus, the only adventurers left to fight would be the weak ones, who had worked hard just to make it to this floor. Running into a nasty group of monsters like these would be the same as running into a wall—it would be a difficult feat indeed to make it past the lizardmen once they decided to block off their path.

Professor Damian raised a hand, and we all fell quiet. “Do you want me to handle them?” he asked. “Even if my dolls suffer a bit of damage, I can have them good as new by tomorrow.”

Hmm. I paused, debating my options.

“What’s all this?” the second head demanded from inside the Jewel. He sounded almost...disappointed. “It’s just lizardmen!”

“Come to think of it, I’ve run across a few of them several times before,” the third head said thoughtfully. “They weren’t particularly strong.”

“Indeed,” the fourth head agreed. “Human bandits are much more difficult to deal with. Lizardmen are sturdy, and weak spells don’t work on them, but that’s about it.”

“They’re not cute, so I don’t care,” the fifth head said with a disinterested yawn.

“I don’t think they’re *that* easy to beat,” the sixth head commented in a cheery tone. “They’re pretty amusing if you fight them head-on. They’ve got some skilled veterans among their ranks.”

“Regardless, those lizardmen are no match for you, Lyle,” the seventh head said with a sigh. “You could seal the entrance with the dolls to take them on one at a time, or you could just wipe them all out using Novem’s magic. Really, they’re no issue.”

Aramthurst's dungeon isn't flammable, I mused, so even if we slung around a few powerful spells without taking much care, it's unlikely we'd provoke that much of a reaction. So should we go with that, or... Hmm.

All of a sudden, I recalled I hadn't gotten the chance to use my new sabers yet. They were fine pieces too—I'd bought them in Central before we left on our journey to Aramthurst.

I came to a decision. "Aria, Sophia, get ready. We're going to be heading out together. Oh, and Miranda, would you like to join?"

"Naturally," Miranda replied. "You can put a bit more trust in me. I'm pretty strong."

Aria gave me a nod. "I'm ready when you are."

"I'm good to go too," Sophia added. "I haven't managed to do much yet today, so I need to put in some effort whenever I can."

I nodded, then turned to the others. I gave Novem and Professor Damian the task of guarding Clara and keeping watch over the room's entrance.

"Are you really sure about this, milord?" Novem asked, giving me an anxious look.

"Yeah," I muttered. "I think I can do this."

I snuck back over to the door to the room where the lizardmen were clustered, Aria, Sophia, and Miranda following behind me. Once we were close enough, I told Aria to get their attention.

She nodded—almost immediately, her body began to let off a faint red glow. Then, at speeds faster than my eyes could perceive, she charged into the room, circled around the lizardman keeping watch, and stabbed her spear straight through its chest.

The lizardman let out a scream of agony, causing the other five to surge to their feet, weapons in hand.

"They're quick to react," I murmured under my breath, gesturing for the others to join the fight.

We all ran into the room, and Sophia quickly finished off the lizardman Aria

had skewered. She pulled her battle-axe off her back, lopping off its head in one efficient motion.

“One down!” I called out.

The five lizardmen moved forward to surround us, and Miranda pulled out two knives, nailing them into a lizardman’s eyes and leaving it blind. As its movements dulled, she pounced, drawing a dagger from her hip and tearing it through the monster’s throat.

Blood gusted from the wound, and the lizardman crumpled to its knees.

“That’s two,” I yelled. “Next up is...”

I braced myself, a saber clutched in each of my hands. One of the lizardmen stood before me, ready to attack, while another circled behind me. Their arms pulled back as they prepared to swing at me with their axes.

I darted forward, handily evading the pincer attack by running toward the lizardman standing in front of me. I saw its eyes widen as the swing of the one behind me fell short. A rush of wind whooshed by me, stirred up by the force of the lizardman’s missed strike.

I strengthened my grip on my sabers, dodging as the lizardman in front of me took a horizontal swipe at me with its axe. As soon I was in range, I sliced my blade into its body, and grinned in triumph as it collapsed to the ground.

Using its body as a foothold, I launched myself up into the air and twisted around, taking in the shock on the face of the lizardman who’d been attacking me from behind.

“You sure you should be so focused on me?” I asked with a laugh.

The lizardman blinked, but was too slow to react—a battle-axe came spinning through the air from a few feet away, ripping deep into its abdomen.

I dropped onto another lizardman—one that hadn’t been looking at me—and slashed down into its flesh as I landed right on top of it.



Only one left.

The last lizardman stared at me, its mouth open wide in an attempt to intimidate. It took a step in my direction, but before its foot even hit the ground, a knife and a hatchet came soaring in its direction and ripped into its body.

Aria zoomed over, thrusting her spear into the lizardman's head, and just like that the battle was over.

I confirmed all six lizardmen were dead, then called the rest of our party into the room as well.

"Not too shabby, Lyle," the third head said, clapping in appreciation. "You're still a bit inexperienced, but keep fighting, and you'll get the hang of it. Combat is the one area where you really, truly shine."

What's that supposed to mean? I thought, suddenly feeling a bit cranky.

"You're still putting in too much strength when you swing," the fifth head added. "You have some good weapons now, so remember that it doesn't take that much force to make a clean cut."

I won the battle, but no one's giving me any sincere compliments, I thought, fully pouting now.

I had just finished wiping the blood off my sabers and restoring them to their sheaths when I noticed Miranda walked over in my direction.

"Lyle, you're incredible," she said, a wide smile crossing her lips. "I felt like I was watching a master."

I blushed. "Y-You really think so?"

"Yes!" she affirmed. "It was amazing. Truly...*amazing*. You're so strong, and reliable, and you don't look down on the people around you even though you're a noble..."

Suddenly, something in the atmosphere around her turned dark and moody.

"Uh...Miranda?" I asked, concerned.

"Hey, Lyle... If I told you I liked you...would that be a bother?"

“Huh?!”

Seeing my bewilderment, Miranda forced a smile. “Sorry,” she apologized. “Forget I said that. It looks like Clara’s got a big job ahead of her, so I’ll go ahead and help her collect the Demonic Stones.”

Before I had a chance to stop her, she was gone, stalking off to where Clara crouched over the dead bodies of the lizardmen.

I’m not in a place to respond to her feelings, I thought, heart aching. If only I hadn’t tried to fake hit on her. If we’d met under better circumstances, then...

“This is a result of your own actions, Lyle,” the sixth head broke in, interrupting my regrets. “You can’t pretend it didn’t happen; if it hurts, you need to make sure it doesn’t happen again. The pain is your punishment.”

Knowing no one was listening, I muttered, “Yeah, I know...”

Chapter 50: Floor Boss

The dungeon beneath Aramthurst was possessed of several characteristics that it was best to keep note of. One of those characteristics was that a boss monster could be found every ten floors. These floor bosses were a pain to deal with—even if you managed to defeat them, they’d just revive after a certain amount of time.

This system could actually be quite convenient, though, based on how you looked at it.

After defeating the boss once, a party of adventurers could optimize their equipment and strategy specifically for battling against it, allowing them to take the creature down more efficiently the second time around. What’s more, the Demonic Stones each boss possessed were quite valuable—they were superior to the Stones of normal monsters in both size and purity.

The point of this explanation is simple, in the end—the thing that should be noted is the fact that these bosses are doomed to be defeated as soon as they spawn, at least on the tenth and twentieth floors, which the floor-transfer devices connect to directly.

After we reached the twenty-first floor, we defeated the surrounding monsters and then chose a room where we could be assured of our safety to set up camp. At the moment, I was helping Clara put together a...certain something.

“This is...a curtain?”

Clara nodded. “Yes. Pull it up like this, and...then no one else will be able to see.”

To be honest with you, the thing we were constructing in the corner of the room was a toilet. We’d sectioned it off from sight with a curtain, but there really wasn’t much to be seen—just a single, collapsible bucket and a chair with

a hole in the center that we'd placed above it.

Having completed the rest of the setup, Clara stepped forward and proceeded to toss something into the bucket.

"What was that?" I asked her.

"Deodorant," she explained. "It gets rid of the smell. Makes it easier to deal with."

It certainly wasn't glamorous, but we *were* stuck in a dungeon, after all. It wasn't like humans like us could just eliminate these sorts of natural physiological phenomena... Instead, a bit of wisdom and ingenuity was required.

That reminds me, I heard once before that the reason male adventurers stopped regarding female adventurers as women was because of stuff like this. They said the female adventurers lost their shame after having to deal with such intimate situations around the men, and ended up becoming more masculine as a result. My eyes darted toward Novem. *I wouldn't want that to happen to her...* I thought despondently.

Clara gave me a curious look, sensing the downward spiral of my mood, but in the end didn't ask. Instead, she said, "It's a basic setup, yes. But it's better than nothing."

I nodded. "Oh, I can understand that very well."

"It's the same on the battlefield," the fifth head chimed in indifferently. "It's pretty common to come across feces or urine, and if you slice through someone's stomach..."

I didn't hear the rest—the grossness purged it from my mind. *Really, I understand. You don't have to explain. Seriously.*

As I was recovering from what I'd just heard, Clara wandered off to prepare something else. I went ahead and tagged along after her.

"Please keep your hands clean," she said, her voice drifting to me over her shoulder. "And if you ever need hot water, just tell me. I can have it ready at any time."

Seeing how diligently Clara moved about the camp, completing various tasks, I found myself feeling quite impressed with her. “You’re working pretty hard,” I commented.

She looked over at me and sighed. “Well, there would usually be more supporters than just me.”

Oh, I thought, feeling abruptly troubled.

“*However*,” she added, seeing the conflicted look on my face, “I do understand your reasons.”

The problem was, even though it was easy to hire people, we didn’t know who we could or couldn’t trust. I was using my Arts full force for this mission—I wanted to avoid having info about my abilities falling into the hands of anyone who wouldn’t keep it safe. In that regard, Clara was an excellent supporter. Even if you gave her conduct a closer look, she’d yet to show any signs that she would leak information, steal Demonic Stones, or slack off on her work.

It’s kinda ironic, I thought. *Her good reputation is what got the Guild’s attention, but it’s also the main reason she’s constantly being introduced to awful noble students from the Academy.*

In the end, I just gave Clara an apologetic look. “We didn’t have much prep time for this mission, so I didn’t have the leisure to recruit more members. I should really give it some more thought next time.”

She accepted that answer calmly, not saying a word in response. Instead, she led me around the camp and explained various tasks to me as she did them.

In no time at all, our camp preparations reached their completion.

I woke to the sound of the long, deep breaths of sleeping people. Groggily, I opened my eyes; by the time they’d focused, I’d realized that Miranda was the only one in the camp left awake.

Usually, someone else should be up and alert as well, I thought, looking around and catching sight of a black-robed woman leaning against the wall in a sitting position. *Oh, looks like Sophia fell asleep.*



“That’s rare for Sophia...” I murmured softly.

She was an earnest girl—I’d never seen her nod off even once before now. What’s more, we’d given her time to get a little sleep in before she went on lookout duty, so she’d been fully prepared. She definitely should’ve been well rested enough to stay awake.

I mulled over whether to wake her or not, but Miranda stopped me with a smile.

“Let her sleep,” she whispered. “She looked exhausted.”

I scratched awkwardly at my head and stared at Sophia’s peaceful, sleeping face. *She does look pretty endearing...*

I sighed. “I guess it’s fine.”

“I would expect Aria to doze off, but not Sophia,” the second head said, sounding perplexed. “It’s strange. Her seriousness is like her only redeeming feature.”

Left with nothing else to do, I watched Miranda as she inspected her tools by the light of her lantern. It was almost like watching a seasoned adventurer at work—she carefully looked over each item, periodically conducting a bit of maintenance.

When I at last checked the time, I found it was already late enough in the night that I was better off getting up than falling back asleep. I went ahead and climbed to my feet, then stretched to drive the stiffness from my limbs. Nearby, Novem, Aria, Clara, and Professor Damian were still asleep.

Dungeons were dangerous places when most of your comrades were out of commission like this. I checked the area surrounding us for enemies just in case, but there were none nearby.

Looks like there are two other adventurer parties with us here on the twenty-first floor, I noticed. They were both stationary on my mental map, most likely because they were resting.

Feeling more at ease, I went and sat down near Miranda. While I’d been scanning the area, she had pulled out a breakfast soup. What’s more, the food

looked like it was fresh, not the leftovers from yesterday I'd been expecting.

"Did you make this just now?" I asked her. "What happened to the food we kept from yesterday?"

Miranda shrugged. "We ate more than I thought we would," she admitted. "It's not a big deal—we have the supplies to spare. Anyhow, would you like to have some?"

I nodded, and Miranda dished some of the soup into a bowl. She handed it to me, along with a bit of bread.

This tastes quite different from the type of soup Novem prepares, I thought once I began eating. *Regardless, it's delicious all the same.*

"This isn't half bad," I told Miranda, sending her a smile.

"I see," she said softly. "That's good to know."

After that, we passed the time in silence. It was quite awkward between us, but there wasn't much I felt I could do about that. My ancestors were no help either—they were chatting away within the Jewel, but none of their conversations had anything to do with my current predicament.

"Hey, Lyle," the third head said, finally deigning to offer me some advice. "Maybe you should doodle a bit on Sophia's face. Personally, I think it's a fitting punishment."

"Wh-What?!" the fourth head cried, his voice shaking as if a bad memory had just reared its ugly head. "Why would you suggest doing such a thing to a woman's face? If you did that, then— Urgh! M-My stomach's starting to act up..."

I never knew that my ancestors could have stomach pains, I thought, bemused. *I mean, they're just memories... What could he possibly be thinking of that it made him react like that?* I dwelled on the thought for a while, but ultimately just sighed. *Ah, well. Honestly, I don't really care.*

Still, it had gotten far too quiet—both in my head and outside of it. I decided to finally try striking up a conversation with Miranda.

"This is a bit out of the blue," I said, "but I was just wondering, what are you

studying at the Academy?”

Miranda blinked in surprise, but answered my question without hesitation. “Oh, well...just various things,” she told me. “Mostly medicines. I wanted to treat Shannon’s eyes, so at first, I devoted a bit of my time to studying magic, but I was ultimately rather helpless in that field. Studying medicine was my next best bet, so that’s what I settled on in the end.” She sighed. “Curing Shannon is still hopeless, mind you. Apparently, the fact that she was born with her affliction has something to do with it. A few famous doctors have already told me I’m better off giving up on her, since her ailment is said to be something a person can’t actually recover from.”

“Miranda really inherited Milleia’s kindness,” the sixth head said in a teary voice. “Shannon, on the other hand...”

“Hey, don’t cry,” the fifth head said in an unpleasant voice. “You’re a big boy, remember? Still, it’s rare to find a girl that kindhearted these days. They were rare in my era too.”

He must mean rare among nobles, specifically, I thought with a short laugh.

I turned my focus back to Miranda and asked, “What about Professor Damian? Does he specialize in medicine too?”

It would make sense if that was the case, since it would explain how Miranda was acquainted with him. It seemed I was wrong, though, since Miranda shook her head at me with a chuckle.

“No, he doesn’t specialize in that area. I *do* take some classes from him, admittedly, but I’m taking all sorts of courses. I’ve always been quite adept, you know. I can do mostly anything, at least up to a certain level. But that’s where it ends. I’m a jack of all trades, master of none.”

“That’s not true,” I refuted. “The way you fought today, it wasn’t just some—”

Miranda cut me off with a gusty sigh, staring into the light of the lantern. “When you get down to the meat and potatoes of it, you’ll realize that those who have the strongest traits end up the strongest. I don’t have Aria’s speed, or Sophia’s strength. I don’t have Novem’s adeptness with magic, or the ability to use a specialized Art. I’m not capable of masterfully using multiple Arts like you

can either, Lyle.”

I bashfully rubbed a finger against the tip of my nose, only to hear a cacophonous booing from the Jewel.

“Oh, so you look at *us* funny when we compliment you, but you’ll believe it when a pretty girl says it, huh?” demanded the third head. “Also, Lyle—don’t forget you’ve got Novem, okay? I know everyone’s asleep, but you should really tone down your flirting.”

Ugh, I thought. He’s so annoying.

Miranda climbed to her feet. “Anyway, it’s about time for us all to get up,” she said. “I’ll go ahead and wake Sophia.”

Miranda walked over to the sleeping girl, then softly called her name.

Sophia leapt to her feet with a gasp. “Huh? Wh-What was I doing?” she asked, face flushing a deep red. The moment she realized what happened, she began to apologize profusely.

Wow, she’s even gone teary-eyed, I thought, surprised at how hard she was taking it. I guess it’s true that she made a pretty massive mistake, though. Our party could have suffered an extraordinary amount of damage if we were attacked while she was asleep.

Miranda just met Sophia’s dismay with a sweet smile. “Now then,” she said, trying to soothe the other girl’s flusteredness, “today’s going to be busy, isn’t it?”

She’s probably right, I thought.

We were on the twenty-first floor now, but were planning to make our way much deeper today. We’d most likely run into a good number of monsters, since the floor-transfer device didn’t connect to any floors beyond the twenty-fifth, and so few adventurers challenged those levels at any great frequency. The Guild hadn’t received any reports of the thirtieth floor’s boss being defeated lately either.

“I don’t know what it is,” the second head muttered, “but I’ve got this weird feeling...almost like we’re walking straight into a trap. I don’t like this at all.”

If someone like him, who's got such sharp instincts, is saying ominous stuff like that, we better keep our eyes out for trouble, I thought.

When we'd headed out for the day, I led us on a route that avoided as many encounters as possible, both with monsters and other adventures. It had worked out pretty well for us thus far, but we came to a standstill on floor twenty-nine. We were pretty close to the passageway that led to the next floor, but the sight of what awaited us down the dark corridor ahead meant trouble.

"This is bad news..." I muttered.

I stared into the gloom, watching several monsters shuffle back and forth. The only one I could see clearly was a lizardman, since it held a lit lantern in one of its hands.

If we make too much noise, we're going to draw all of their attention, I thought, feeling wary.

"This is what you get for trying to avoid all of them," the fifth head said with a sigh. "You should have taken stock of where all the enemies were when you came to this floor, and made some noise around the entrance to get them to gather there instead. That being said, if you don't cull them a bit, you're going to have trouble on the road back to the surface."

As I counted out the enemies in front of me and constructed a plan, I felt genuine remorse for my actions. "We can do this," I swore under my breath. "I'll handle it."

Those words were enough to stir Novem to motion. "Milord," she said carefully, gripping my arm, "please don't do anything crazy."

I don't think my plan is crazy, I mused. It's just more convenient for me to do on my own.

Sure, the corridor was spacious, but if the battle became too messy, we'd end up mixing up friend with foe. If that happened, it would become difficult for any of us to use magic. I could just see the disaster unfolding in my head.

"I'll be fine," I reassured her. "Everyone, stand by."

With that, I drew my sabers and darted into battle.

“Water Bullet,” I muttered, holding out my left hand and directing it at the lizardman. Water manifested from my fingertips, amassing into an orb that shot out toward the lantern clutched in one of his hands.

There was a rush of noise as the light was extinguished. The monsters were clearly agitated. Thankfully, I was using the second head’s Art, All, so even in the dark I knew the area around me like the back of my hand.

I rushed up to the lizardman, which was now scrambling for its sword, and plunged one of my sabers straight into its heart. It thumped to the ground, dead, and the sound sent the rest of the blinded monsters flailing their weapons around in the darkness.

“Whoops,” I mumbled.

The monsters might be having a hard time seeing, but that didn’t mean they were entirely blind. They clearly had at least a vague idea of where I stood. I shouldn’t have been surprised—these creatures had spent their entire lives roaming the dark halls of this dungeon.

There was a whoosh, and an orc’s wooden cudgel swung over my head.

Now that was a bit too close for comfort, I thought, wincing.

I took aim at a gap in the orc’s metal armor and plunged my saber inside, tearing through the monster’s windpipe. It coughed up blood as it fell.

Another lizardman swung its battle-axe in my direction, but I evaded it with a backstep. Having missed its mark, the momentum behind the lizardman’s arm continued carrying the axe forward, sending it deep into the flesh of a nearby orc.

That’s what I was aiming for! I cheered internally. *Friendly fire. I knew I was right to fight this battle alone.*

As the lizardman struggled to extract its axe from the orc, I ran one of my sabers through its torso. The last of the monsters, which was another orc, tried to flee, but I hopped onto its back and stabbed down into the unguarded nape of its neck.

“I mean, I don’t really care, but...why don’t lizardmen wear armor over their chests or bellies?” I wondered aloud.

They wore protective gear on their arms, legs, and shoulders, at least, so why not the rest of their bodies? I was genuinely curious.

Maybe it’s because wearing a full suit of armor is a bit cumbersome for them... I mused.

Regardless, the battle was over. I lit the area up with a magic light, and the rest of my party made their way over to join me.

Clara had a look on her face that made it clear she had some thoughts and feelings to share with me, but ultimately she chose to prioritize her work instead. She turned away from me, and began to collect the monsters’ Demonic Stones.

Professor Damian was seated on the shoulder of one of his dolls—he gave me a bemused look as it walked over to me. “I know I’m not one to speak, but Lyle, you... Never mind, it’s nothing.”

“Please, Professor, finish what you were going to say,” I told him. “Now you’re just making me curious.”

I heard the fourth head sigh from within the Jewel. “Lyle, it’s important you realize it on your own. How about you just make a point of thinking a bit before you act next time, hmm?”

What did I do to be subjected to that sort of comment? I wondered as I wiped off my blades and sheathed them away.

Novem peered at me from a few feet away. “Milord... Are you injured?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine,” I reassured her. “We should hurry up and get moving.”

Shortly after that, we reached the thirtieth floor, the home of one of Aramthurst’s dungeon’s floor bosses. We’d learned on our way down that boss floors were constructed a little differently than the others; they weren’t built in long mazelike hallways, like the labyrinths we’d been navigating, but were

instead just made up of a singular path that led to a large circular room at its center. That was it—just a circle and a straight line cutting through its center.

That being said, getting a glimpse into the boss room was pretty easy. I stared ahead at the creature that was about to be our foe, my eyes following its cylindrical form as it bobbed up and down in the air at the center of the boss room. I wasn't really sure what it was, though its appearance was simple enough—it was a round, blob-like thing that appeared about as tall as two adults stacked on top of each other. It had a singular eye that gazed out from its top half, and four spheres that made up its lower half.

“That’s the boss of the thirtieth floor,” Clara explained to all of us. “A party I previously accompanied surrounded it on all sides with shields, and launched all sorts of attacks at it from behind the defensive wall they made. The monster’s eye can emit an immensely hot beam of light that melts through whatever it touches. Its physical attacks are also a threat—if it manages to tackle you, you’ll be crushed flat... You’ll be in no state to continue.”

So, I thought, if you keep your distance, it melts you, but if you stay too close, it’ll use its enormous size to ram into you. The combat sounds easy enough, but the monster’ll still be difficult to handle.

Clara then began to explain to us various ways the boss could be defeated. “You can lure it into trying to tackle you, then catch it off guard and start wailing on it,” she told us. “In that case, it’s important to not stand in front of its eye. Beyond that, there’s always the option of destroying the eye itself. Once its eye is crushed, the creature will have no way to make any proper attacks.”

It sounds more plausible for us to aim for the eye, instead of trying to surround it, I decided after listening to everything Clara had to say. *We don’t really have enough party members to make that first strategy work.*

“Whatever you decide, be careful,” Clara cautioned, breaking into my thoughts. “You won’t be sealed inside the boss room, but once you’ve drawn the monster’s attention, it will chase you down the dungeon’s halls if you run. You can’t go into this with the mentality that you’ll be able to run away if it looks like you’re going to fail—that could get all of us annihilated.”

Well, that’s terrifying, I thought with a shiver. *If that thing chases us down a*

straight path, it'll just melt us all into goo from behind with its light beam.

“Oh?” I heard suddenly from within the Jewel. The third head seemed to have thought of something. “Why don’t we just lure it into the passageway? That sounds quite fun, don’t you think?”

“Ah, I see,” the sixth head said, chuckling. “It would be easier to fight in such a small space, instead of a vast area with nowhere to hide.”

Here we go again, I thought. The scheming conference has begun.

“So you’re saying Lyle’s party just has to settle things here, in the hallway, then...” the second head mused.

“Yes,” the third head agreed. “The boss will have nowhere to run in this narrow corridor—though, mind you, neither will we.”

“That means those two will be the key...” the fourth head murmured.

“Beyond that, someone needs to act as bait,” the fifth head mused. “I think I’d like a bit more information.”

The sixth head let out a hearty laugh. “Lyle should do just fine in that role. Rather, I can’t think of anyone who’d be better suited.”

“Y-You’re suggesting we use *Lyle* as bait?” the seventh head growled indignantly. “Well, I know it’s the best option, but...I just can’t accept it...”

Sounds like they want some sort of information confirmed, I thought.

Once I’d gotten them to tell me what it was, I turned and confirmed it with Clara. Feeling more secure once they had her answer, my ancestors then determined we wouldn’t have any problems if we followed through with their scheme.

That settled, I conveyed our plan to the rest of my party.

“He’s definitely got a few screws loose...” Aria said under her breath.

At the moment, she was hanging from her spear, which had been plunged into a point high up on the wall of the corridor leading to the boss room. It seemed like it would be a bit of a precarious position—Aria only had one hand

clenched tightly around her spear, while the other was busy cradling Sophia to her chest—but it wasn't so bad now that Sophia had lightened them both using her Art.

I should be able to hang here comfortably for a decent amount of time, Aria decided.

Sophia shifted in Aria's arms, causing her to glance down.

"I need to make up for my mistake..." the other girl muttered despondently.

Yep, she's still anxious over falling asleep during her lookout shift, Aria realized. *Looks like it's really weighing heavy on her.*

"Just forget about it," Aria said, sighing. "With the way we do things, lookout honestly isn't that important."

After all, they had Lyle, who'd used his Arts to guide them to nearby monsters so they could defeat them all in advance. Their safety had been all but guaranteed by the time he was done.

But that wasn't enough for Sophia; she shook her head. "That's nonsense," she snapped. "Everyone entrusted their lives to me, and I... Well, I think it's strange."

"What do you mean?" Aria asked.

"I ate a good meal before my shift, and I slept properly," Sophia said, her face serious. "I'd practically slept until morning when I jumped on to lookout duty. So, how could I have fallen asleep at that hour, when I'd only just woken up?"

"Maybe your body just wanted more sleep," Aria said dismissively.

To tell the truth, she didn't have many thoughts on the matter.

Though, it is certainly quite strange that Sophia dozed off in the middle of her duties, with how earnest she normally is about things... Aria thought. *Ah, well, we've got free time until Lyle arrives. Might as well continue the conversation.*

"Did anything...feel different from usual?" Aria asked Sophia.

Sophia shook her head. "No, nothing in particular. Miranda offered me some of the leftover bread and soup from yesterday, but that's about—"

She was cut off by a commotion brewing at the entrance to the corridor. The two girls watched as Lyle raced out of the boss room, the floating cylinder-shaped monster drifting after him.

Aria immediately changed gears. “They’re here,” she whispered to Sophia. “Get ready.”

Sophia’s worried expression immediately shifted to a serious one. “Ready when you are,” she murmured back.

The boss monster gathered light in its eye as it chased after Lyle, then fired it off as a beam. The attack collided with the floor, the impact site turning a livid red and then melting away.

The scent of smoke and searing heat filled the air as Lyle skillfully maneuvered around the boss monster’s attack, guiding it closer and closer to the spot underneath where Aria and Sophia hung waiting.

He’s doing way too much again, Aria thought with a sigh.

She had to admit, she found it frustrating that despite everything Lyle seemed to have going on inside his head, he never actually shared any of his thoughts with her or the rest of his party. He had a habit of reaching his own conclusions, without taking anyone else’s opinions into consideration.

Perhaps he’s just choosing what he sees as the best possible options, Aria told herself. *Still, to the rest of us, it just looks like he’s taking all the responsibility onto himself. That makes me feel like he doesn’t trust us in the slightest, and I’m sure I’m not the only one that feels that way. I just... I just wish he talked to us a bit more. I want him to rely on me more.*

Aria gritted her teeth in frustration. She knew it wasn’t that easy—she and Sophia weren’t strong enough *or* competent enough for Lyle to do as she wished.

“Aria!” Sophia whispered harshly, pulling Aria from her thoughts. “It’s here!”

Aria waited until the boss monster was directly beneath her, then tore her spear free and kicked off the wall with Sophia still clenched in her arms. Aria had judged the distance well—she landed directly atop the boss monster’s head.

Sophia immediately confirmed where the monster's eye was, then increased her and Aria's weight. As she made them heavier and heavier, she concentrated her power so that the monster would collapse in a direction where its eye was blocked off from the rest of the hallway.

"How am I doing?" Sophia asked Aria. "You're feeling pretty hefty, right?"

Well, that's a line I could've gone without hearing, as a woman, Aria thought as she felt the monster start wobbling more and more beneath her feet.

Finally, the girls' combined weight reached a point that the monster could no longer endure, and its cylindrical body fell sideways onto the floor. Now that the creature was grounded, Sophia focused on increasing its body weight instead, pinning it to the ground with its own mass.

"Looks like the reason this thing was always bobbing around was because it could hardly keep itself up," Aria said, wiping the sweat from her brow.

She released Sophia and gave the boss monster a light kick.

But then, the monster did something unexpected—it spoke.

"...sys—! Er...or..."

Shocked and disturbed, Aria quickly backed away. "Th-That thing just spoke!" she shouted.

That monster's just creepy, Aria thought, shivering. *It just doesn't feel right to have something that's not humanoid speak in a human tongue.*

Professor Damian hopped down from his seat on his doll's shoulder and strode over to the helpless boss monster. "We did receive a report at the Academy that the creature spoke," he admitted, "but no one can understand what it's saying. It's interesting, but the other researchers are all busy, so no one's looking into it."

He's got some sort of device in his hand, Aria realized, eyeing the professor.

She watched as the older man stared intently at the top of the cylindrical monster's head, then moved forward and slowly began to use his tool to take it apart.

There's not even a single drop of blood coming out of it... How strange.

“Th-That thing’s kinda scary,” Aria stammered. “It doesn’t even bleed! It’s like it’s not even alive.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a living organism,” Professor Damian told her in a disinterested tone. “Not that this kind of creature is rare, here in Aramthurst. Oh, there we go! Got it open.”

Aria had expected to see something more graphic upon looking inside the creature’s pried-open skull, but the sight before her was quite different from what she’d been imagining. There was no brain, no pile of organs—just a bunch of metal plates and a jumbled mess of differently colored strings.

“Umm... What *is* this?” Aria demanded, taken aback.

The professor didn’t pay her any mind. “Oh, good grief, I’ve already seen my share of these; I’ve long lost interest,” he muttered under his breath. He reached out and picked out one of the threads. “Hmm, is it this one?” he mumbled, pulling it out of the monster’s head and cutting through it. “Well, the body’s in good condition, at least,” he finally said with a sigh. “But that’s about it.”

Aria gave up getting the professor to answer her questions and looked around for Lyle—he must have been worn out from running around as bait, since he was sitting at the end of the corridor and drinking some water.

Novem was standing close by, looking at him with weary eyes, but Lyle didn’t seem to be meeting her gaze.

Looks like he can tell Novem’s got something to say to him, Aria thought with a snort. Doesn’t look like he has any intention of revising his thought process, though.

After that, a few minutes passed as Professor Damian fiddled with the cylindrical boss monster. When he finally stepped away, Sophia reverted its weight to normal. The creature showed no sign of moving again.

Clara took that as her time to get to work—she stepped forward and started to begin the Demonic Stone collection process. “For this monster, all you extract is the Demonic Stone,” she explained.

Aria took a step in the other girl’s direction, prepared to help her out, but

Miranda reached over and settled a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll take care of it, Aria,” Miranda told her. “You go and get some rest.”

“B-But—”

“Don’t worry about it. This is my way of contributing since I didn’t get to help out with the battle this time around.”

Overpowered by Miranda’s smile, all Aria could do was nod. She watched in a daze as Miranda headed off to Clara, and then realized to her dismay that there was nothing left for her to do to occupy her time.

After a short break, my party and I headed back out into the dungeon. We proceeded straight through the thirty-first floor and quickly got to the thirty-second, but there we ran into an issue. It was starting to become difficult for us to progress any farther.

As we went deeper, the monsters were growing stronger, but the bigger problem was how many of them we had to face. I’d known there was a big drop-off in the number of active adventurers after floor twenty-five, but this was even worse than I’d expected. The last party I’d seen had been doing their best on the twenty-seventh floor—I hadn’t spotted a single one since.

Unfortunately for us, that meant that the monsters on the following floors were growing incredibly numerous.

It’s time for us to set up camp, I decided, scanning my internal map for a safe room.

Once I’d decided where we were going to stay, I had my party get to work killing off all the monsters in the surrounding area. Within a short amount of time, our safety was assured, and we all piled into the safe room to take a break.

I relaxed for a short while as we settled into our home for the night, focusing on recovering my strength, and then went ahead and used the seventh head’s Box Art.

Once the magic circle had manifested, Sophia hauled over the cylindrical body

of the boss we'd defeated—which she'd been carrying ever since we'd won our fight on the thirtieth floor—and placed it inside the circle. That done, we focused on taking out the supplies we'd need for the next day, and placing the items we no longer needed back into storage.

Professor Damian eyed the sizable wooden crate we'd pulled from the storage inside the magic circle. "Should I have one of the dolls carry our supplies?" he asked. "I rarely have to use all four of them in battle."

No one spoke up to tell the professor that was a good idea, but no one told him it was a bad idea either. This seemed to be enough for him, since he immediately started pulling out tools and using them to modify the box so it could be strapped to his doll.

He really is a free spirit, I thought with an inward chuckle.

As he worked, we finished swapping out the last of our supplies from within the magic circle. Everyone backed away, and I shut down the seventh head's Art. We all watched as the leftover items were sucked inside the magic circle, before the entire thing disappeared.

Sophia in particular seemed struck by wonder at the sight. She had a bundle of vegetables she'd pulled from the magic circle clutched to her chest.

"I still don't understand what principle that Art operates on," she said, amazed. "I mean, these vegetables are still as fresh as can be!"

By that point I was borrowing Novem's shoulder—she'd already been behind me, ready to catch me when I collapsed.

"Honestly, I don't know the principle either," I admitted to Sophia. "I just think it's convenient."

Professor Damian looked over at us from where he was busily attaching the crate to his doll, and let out a long sigh. "That Art is quite incredible, to tell the truth," he said wistfully. "If we could replicate it using a Demonic Tool, I'm sure it would change the world. Alas, that won't be happening."

So he's thinking about artificially recreating the seventh head's Box Art with a Demonic Tool, I thought. *That would make it so everyone could use it. But...*

“Wait, that can’t be done?” I asked the professor.

He lumbered up off the ground, seeming to have finished modding the crate. Indeed, he must have, since his next move was to climb on top of it and settle himself into a sitting position, as if he was checking to see if it was comfortable enough.

Finally, he replied, “Most likely it’s impossible. I mean, just looking at how you react to casting that Art, I can tell the mana cost is simply ridiculous. It’s complicated too, which means it’ll be incredibly difficult to replicate. I’m sure you could do it if you disregarded profit, cost, etc., but thinking about how many times you’d have to fail before you finally got it right... Suffice to say, I’m not interested in taking on such a project, so I don’t wish to dwell on it any longer.”

“Like hell my Art can be imitated that easily,” the seventh head muttered, sounding irritated.

It was a rather irrational response, so I just ignored him and kept watching the professor who’d turned to look at Clara as she busily set up camp.

“Clara has that light magic she uses, with the orbs, right?” he pointed out. “Something like that could be easily reproduced in a Demonic Tool, but anything more complicated would require the Tool to be made larger, and you’d need Mana Crystals to power it. Demonic Tools might sound amazing to the average user, but it’s not like they can just do anything. Although, they’re an easier way to obtain Arts than that Gem you’ve got, Lyle.”

I nodded. I knew enough about Gems to know that it took a *long* time to record Arts onto them. The Jewel I wore contained the entire history of House Walt. It had taken approximately two hundred years for so many Arts to be jammed into it.

Demonic Tools were much more convenient—once made, you could immediately use one to obtain a handy Art. You could mass-produce them too. That’s why Demonic Tools had ultimately taken over the market, and Gems had fallen into obscurity.

Come to think of it... I realized, I had a question for the professor. I can’t believe I forgot to ask it until now.

“Professor Damian, I heard you were one of the Academy’s Great Seven, so I was just wondering... What are you researching, exactly?”

Clara and Miranda both spun in my direction with shock on their faces.

Oops, I thought, wincing. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked...

The professor didn’t seem to be offended, though—he jumped down from his seat on the crate and strode up to me, pushing up his glasses.

“Ah, so you’re curious about my research, yes? I must admit that it’s nothing more than a means to an end. It’s a...method, to perfect a certain something. I have a final goal in mind, but the research itself is but one step in a very long process.”

So there’s something he wants to perfect, huh? I mused.

“Could I ask what your final goal is?”

A splendid smile spread across the professor’s face. It was completely different from all the troubled, bored, and disinterested looks I’d seen on his face before. It was almost like the gleeful smile of an innocent child.

“My goal is to create my own ideal woman!” the professor announced in a booming voice.

The room was dead quiet.

“Umm...what?” I managed.

I had to admit, I hadn’t expected that response *at all*. My mind had gone blank—finding any other words to say to the professor became a struggle.

In the end, I was saved when he began speaking once again, enthusiasm bursting from his voice. “I’ve been thinking about it for as long as I can remember, you see—I have the perfect form of my ideal woman right in my head, yet that ideal does not exist anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, that is the very nature of an ideal—or at least that’s what they’ll have you believe. Yes, everyone around me has told me to compromise, to settle, to face reality, but I’m different from all those simpleminded fools! If something doesn’t exist, you merely have to create it yourself! Is that not the whole point of innovation?!”

At this point, the professor looked to me for confirmation, and I gave him a

listless nod.

“Exactly! And so, I reached my conclusion. I researched and researched, and before I knew it, I’d become an assistant professor. I got promoted to full professor soon after that—I was rising up through the ranks! That’s when the Academy finally agreed to give me decent research funds, but they came with a caveat—I had to teach students. They shoved that duty onto me, despite the fact that I cared nothing for it. All I’ve ever wanted was to create my ideal woman! What’s wrong with that, I ask you?!”

After that, the topic shifted to his working conditions. According to the professor, his students were simply always in his way, and he wasn’t receiving nearly enough funding. Gradually, his grand speech turned into nothing but complaints.

At the end, he even raised his voice to say, “And yet! If I just obtain the Demonic Stone from this request, my research will advance by leaps and bounds! I’ll be far closer to my objective—I have no doubt in my mind. I *need* that Demonic Stone, no matter what!”

I...I think for the time being, I should just nod.

“We’ll do our best, Professor,” I said weakly.

He snorted. “Even if you do your best, it’s pointless if you don’t achieve results! Make sure you do things properly.”

At this point, a heated debate had broken out from within the Jewel.

“*This guy* is supposed to be one of the Great Seven?!” the second head scoffed. “He sounds like he has a screw loose!”

The third head gave a pitying sigh. “Just compromise, my man,” he told the professor, who very much couldn’t hear him. “You’re putting all your efforts into the wrong place.”

“Still...” the fourth head admitted, “he’s quite impressive. To think he managed to climb his way up to a professorship position with a goal like *that*.”

“I can applaud his persistence,” the fifth head said in a disgusted voice, “but I cannot understand his thought process, and I can’t endorse his goal either.”

“Let’s just hope it ends up as research and nothing more,” the sixth head said with a chuckle. “Making a human is kind of taboo, in a sense.”

“We should really do something about this man,” the seventh head said in a serious tone. “You can’t just leave a guy like this to his own devices. Nothing good will come of it.”

They all seem pretty wary of the professor, I realized. Well, I can’t argue with their sentiments, that’s for sure. I pressed my hands together in a silent prayer. *Please, professor, just keep it to research...*

By the afternoon of the next day, Lyle and his party had reached the entrance to the thirty-ninth floor. It was at the base of that ramp that they decided to enact a plan to reduce the number of monsters they’d have to encounter. This plan ended up revolving around Lyle running back and forth through the dungeon, rounding the monsters up by acting as bait.

Novem, for one, was not at all a fan of the plan. She saw Lyle off with palpable discontentment.

“Why does he insist on pushing himself like this?” she muttered to herself.

Typically, it would have been safer to have a whole group of people fighting instead of just one person, but Lyle prioritized efficiency, and he seemed to only have full faith in his own abilities. As such, it had become clear that he required only the minimum amount of effort from the other members of his party.

In the distance, Novem heard the sound of an explosion, followed by the cries of monsters.

Lyle must be using either one of his burst arrows, or a spell.

Gradually, the monsters’ cries grew louder—the creatures were drawing closer to Novem and the other members of their party who were lying in wait. Everyone held their weapons at the ready, their eyes on the darkness ahead.

Clara—who was tucked behind the majority of their fighting force where she was most safe—must have noticed how concerned Novem was. She called over, “Lyle truly is quite impressive. Maybe *too* impressive, as he seems to hold to the

problematic belief that he can solve every problem on his own.”

Novem sighed and nodded. “Yes, I would deeply appreciate it if he relied on us more...”

“I’m not so sure the rest of your party would agree,” Clara shot in, her gaze turning toward Aria and Sophia. “They seem like they’ve grown way too used to relying on Lyle.”

Novem glanced over at the two girls as well. They had their weapons in hand, but they’d completely relaxed their stances, and seemed to be chatting about something or other. Compared to them, Miranda and Professor Damian seemed much better prepared for battle.

I never thought they’d grow this lax, Novem thought, a twinge of uneasiness rising in her stomach. Clara’s right. Milord is so capable that they’ve lost their sense of danger. And at this point, relying on him has just grown to become a part of our routine...

Novem’s grip tightened on her staff, and she cast her disgruntled thoughts away in order to focus on preparing the spell they’d decided she should use earlier. Miranda and Professor Damian began invoking their spells as well, Miranda casting with her right hand and the professor brandishing a staff that was taller than he was.

With three capable magicians, Lyle’s party’s firepower—otherwise known as their overall destructive might—was incredibly high.

Speaking of Lyle, Novem saw a burst of light soar into the air down inside the halls of the thirty-ninth floor. Lyle came racing out of the dark and toward the ramp, followed by a massive procession of monsters.

Facing such numbers really makes these spacious corridors feel narrow and constrictive, Novem mused, pointing her staff at the oncoming wave of foes.

“Ready?” Novem asked the other two magicians.

“Whenever you are,” Miranda replied.

Professor Damian merely nodded.

Now secure in the knowledge that her fellow party members were prepared,

Novem released her spell, sending a blast of fire magic surging ahead. Lyle dodged nimbly around it, sliding into the midst of his comrades as Miranda fired her own ball of fire.

Flames spread across the vast hallway, and Professor Damian pointed his staff directly at those flames—this was where his spell came in.

“Wind Cannon,” the professor said triumphantly. “This’ll roast the whole lot of them.”

A mass of condensed wind shot out from the professor’s staff, sucking the flames farther down the hallway and bringing their intensity to a fever pitch. Soon, the entire corridor was ablaze.

As the fire raged, the dying screams of many different monsters echoed through the dungeon’s halls. By the time the flames finally died down, the walls of the passageway had been scorched black.

Clara put on a mask and headed off to collect the monsters’ Demonic Stones, calling Aria to join her as she went. It would be Aria’s job to give the roasted bodies of the beasts a good stabbing before Clara got to work—it was best to make sure none of them were still clinging onto life.

The rest of the party paused to cover their mouths to try and avoid the overpowering smell of burnt flesh. Lyle was no different—he placed a cloth over his face to filter his erratic breath.

Just as Novem was thinking about drifting over to his side, Miranda walked over to him and struck up a conversation. Novem’s eyes narrowed.

During their time in the dungeon, it had become an increasingly common occurrence for Miranda to appear at Lyle’s side whenever Novem was trying to find time to speak with him. It wasn’t even that Miranda was popping up during Novem and Lyle’s conversations—Novem was hard-pressed to find a chance to talk to him at all.

There’s nothing really wrong with her behavior, Novem thought, *but...admittedly, it annoys me.* Novem tried to focus on scanning her surroundings, ignoring the slight flutter of irritation in the back of her mind. *Sophia’s not acting as she should,* she noticed. *She didn’t go to help Aria and*

Clara, and she's not keeping lookout either. We might need to give her a proper scolding. And...perhaps Aria too.

Novem truly felt mystified by the two girls' behavior—when had they started conducting themselves so badly? She racked her brain, trying to think back to when their attitudes had begun to take a turn for the worse.

They weren't acting this way at all when we first came to Aramthurst... Novem mused. Then, the sight of Miranda tending to Lyle jogged her mind. *Wait, has this been happening ever since we first came across Miranda? No, that can't—* Novem froze, her eyes widening. *Perhaps it could. Lord Lyle seems concerned about her too.*

All at once, Novem began to feel quite suspicious of Miranda. She watched her and Lyle thoughtfully, pondering what motives she might be harboring.

Did all this stem from milord's careless actions? I can't imagine she'd help us out to this degree if it had. If she felt the need to get back at him, there are plenty of other ways to fulfill that wish that don't involve accompanying us to such a dangerous place.

It just didn't feel realistic to Novem to think that Miranda hadn't forgiven Lyle—the girl had gone out of her way to introduce them to Professor Damian, since she'd known he could help them get permission to enter the dungeon, and on top of that, she'd been fighting alongside their party without hesitation.

Am I reading too deeply into it? Novem thought, her brow knitting. She glanced over at Miranda, who seemed to be quite enjoying her friendly chat with Lyle. *Still, even if I am...it would be best for us to keep our guards up.*

Was this a rational decision, or an emotional conclusion stemming from latent envy? Novem couldn't say for sure.

Before she could dwell on the matter further, Lyle glanced over at the rest of the party and indicated they should move on.

Their destination this time was a room near the ramp that would lead them to the fortieth floor. It was quite a vast place, and most importantly, there were no monsters around. It was an area they could safely take a quick moment to kick back and relax.

It was soon decided that the room would be their camping spot for the night, and that they'd use what was left of the day to rest up before challenging the boss on the fortieth floor the next morning. Before long, everyone was working together to help prepare the site.

And yet, for some strange reason, Lyle decided to pronounce, "I'll be right back; I'm going to head down and take a look at what we're dealing with."

Novem felt a headache setting in. "I'll accompany you, milord."

At this rate, if she just left him to it, Lyle might decide to fight the floor boss by himself.

Well, to be fair, Novem admitted, that's quite unlikely. It's the worst-case scenario.

Still, the way he'd been acting leading up to now made her more nervous than she wanted to admit.

"Huh?" Lyle said, blinking at Novem in confusion. "But..."

"I *will* accompany you," she said, her voice firmer this time.

Lyle was forced to give a startled nod. "O-Okay."

And so, the two of them headed off, walking down the ramp together. They stealthily made their way down the long, straight corridor to the boss room, shooting up light sources along the way. These balls of light didn't follow them, though, and only lingered in the air for a short time, so they had to recast the spell periodically. With every new gleaming light they had to cast, it made it that much clearer how convenient Clara's magic really was.

After a while, Lyle sighed. "Maybe I should have brought a lantern."

"Perhaps," Novem agreed. "But more pressingly, milord—haven't you been taking on a bit too much responsibility lately?"

I must take advantage of this opportunity to warn him about the dangers of his behavior, Novem thought determinedly.

It wasn't just that she was worried—Novem could clearly see their current situation developing into a very large problem for their party.

Lyle gave Novem a puzzled look. “Do you think so? But it hasn’t caused any issues.”

“It’s caused nothing *but* issues!” Novem snapped, losing her temper a little. “If you’re the only one working hard, then everyone else—”

“Oh, are you talking about Aria and Sophia?” Lyle asked, interrupting her. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that they’ve been letting their guards down, but I don’t think that’s something we need to worry about right now. We’ll just have to warn them about it later.”

Novem could barely concentrate on what Lyle was saying—she could think of nothing but of how large the gap in power was between him and the girls. Granted, a large part of Lyle’s abilities came from his Arts; they were incredibly powerful tools. It was no exaggeration to say that the seven Arts contained in Lyle’s Gem had supported House Walt since its inception. And while it may have been an inconspicuous talent, Novem knew that Lyle’s ability to wield those Arts like it was nothing was downright abnormal.

Even worse, it wouldn’t be going too far to say that Lyle didn’t expect a thing from the girls outside of battle. He was aware of their lack of caution, but was entirely unbothered by it, since he didn’t feel anything more was required of them.

With the way he’s running things, this party is done for. If this continues, then I’ll have recruited those two for— Novem forced herself to take a deep breath. *I need to get him to understand the problem, somehow.*

Novem glanced over at Lyle’s face, her eyes serious, but she froze when she saw he’d held up a hand to stop her from walking any farther. Following his line of sight, she saw a large gateway. The boss lay just beyond it.

“Well, there’s the boss,” Lyle murmured. “It’s not like we weren’t expecting something like this, but, uh...it’s a box?”

The whole party was aware that the boss of the fortieth floor was rarely defeated, and thus, they’d almost definitely have to face it. It was clear that the actual sight of it caught Lyle off guard, though.

To him, Novem was sure that it looked like nothing more than a large, metal

box. But she knew better. Her eyes widened and her hands clenched around her silver rarium staff as she stared at something that should not have existed. Something that should have never, ever been able to be found here.

Why...? How?!

Sweat trickled down Novem's neck. At this point, she found it unacceptable that this dungeon was allowed to exist in Aramthurst at all. All the passages and rooms made of concrete, the light bulbs and fluorescent lamps that occasionally dotted the hallways... There was even an elevator connecting the dungeon's various floors!

To have a place like this in Aramthurst, where numerous geniuses like Damian Valle gathered, was incredibly dangerous.

"Huh," Lyle said, making Novem twitch in surprise. "I can see some large wheels, but that thing doesn't have anyone to operate it, so it can't be a siege engine. According to the documents..."

Just hearing the phrase "siege engine" made Novem's heart skip a beat, but she quickly told herself to calm down. *It's all right*, she soothed herself. *Not all siege engines are...you know. Catapults and battering rams are siege engines too...*

It wasn't until Novem looked back at the boss room that she understood how panicked she really was. She stared at the box—or rather, the armored tank—and shivered.

Chapter 51: A Formidable Foe

After finishing my reconnaissance on the fortieth floor with Novem, we'd returned to where the others waited on the thirty-ninth.

I'd been sitting with Clara, discussing how best to handle the boss tomorrow, when a certain other party member had decided to participate in our conversation. As if drawn by some irresistible force, my eyes kept drifting in his direction.

And so, I decided to ask, "Professor, why exactly are you joining us for this discussion?"

Professor Damian grinned, his eyes sparkling even more than usual. "*Because,*" he drawled, "I'm curious. And when I'm curious, I can't contain my excitement—I'd rather just dive right into the matter."

To be honest, I didn't really understand why the professor would find our conversation that interesting in the first place, but I decided to let it go. I turned my attention back to Clara.

To my surprise, her sleepy-looking eyes were locked on me, and if I wasn't mistaken, they were a bit irritated. "Lyle, I'm happy you're relying on my knowledge," she said, "but haven't you considered discussing this with anyone else?"

"Why would I do that?" I asked, confused. "You're the most knowledgeable one here."

Her head drooped a bit. "I see," she muttered.

Looking at her expression, I had to wonder, *Did I do something wrong?*

There was a long sigh from within the Jewel. I'd heard the sound enough times that I knew it was the fourth head.

"It would've been a lot better if you'd said something like, 'I have, but I know the strengths and weaknesses of my party members,' Lyle," he said. "That at

least has a nice ring to it. You could have even said you were respecting the opinions of those who knew the area, and that would've sounded better. But the way you're handling things instead...it's a real problem."

"If you keep going like this, you're going to really screw things up," the second head said, sounding concerned. "Mainly when it comes to your relationships."

I don't get it, I thought, exasperated.

I didn't have time to dwell on it either, since Clara started talking again.

"How much do you know about the fortieth floor's boss?" she asked.

"Well, I read all the records on it at the library," I told her honestly.

To be honest, the information I'd gathered didn't look like it was going to be of the greatest use to us. Even knowing what sort of monster the creature was, I didn't have any viable methods we could use to defeat it. All the methods to defeat the monster that had been listed in the records I'd found had involved having a large party with several dozen combatants on hand. There were no instructions on how to take it down with a small party like ours.

Which was, of course, the reason for our current discussion.

"A spider clad in armor," Clara continued. "That's the boss of floor forty. It conceals itself in metal boxlike armor to hide its weak spots. I've never fought it directly, but I've read that it's a very cruel, merciless monster."

"It's like a hermit crab!" the professor cut in, sounding oddly happy. "I think there were quite a few casualties the last time a party challenged it."

Clara nodded and went into the basics of how it had been beaten. "According to the records, this monster's not only able to scurry around on the floor, but the walls and ceiling as well. They say that it has a humanoid upper body and is on the smarter side as far as monsters are concerned, and that using its extensive free range of movement, it will start off by targeting our weakest members. Generally speaking, it seems that if we all gather in one place, it will try to immobilize us with its threads. Thus, ensuring that our party is evenly dispersed throughout the boss room, and purposely having a decoy for it to target, is an effective strategy."

To be more precise, the records Clara spoke of described how a specific party had gathered their logistical support members in one place and left a few combat members behind to protect them during the battle. This cluster of people had served as a decoy team, distracting the monster as the rest of their party launched their attack.

The record also made it clear that it was crucial to target the monster's legs. The more damage they suffered, the more mobility the boss would lose. Once it could no longer maneuver around so swiftly, it was much easier for a party to surround it and beat it down.

These tactics made up the basic method—or rather, the *only* method, since no one had ever tried to defeat it any differently.

“We don't have enough members for this strategy, so we should try something else,” I suggested.

Professor Damian looked at Clara. “Can't Clara and I be the bait, though? I can use my dolls to guard us, so it shouldn't be an issue.”

“I'd rather avoid that,” I told him. “We don't know how the boss will react when it sees your dolls—it may decide not to target you at all.” I sighed. “This whole encounter's going to be trouble.”

Are the bosses in other dungeons this difficult to handle, or is it just Aramthurst? I wondered.

To tell the truth, I wasn't experienced enough yet to know. However...I did have one idea.

“How about we flee into the corridor again?”

The professor nodded. “That's not a bad idea. When you saw the boss, did it look like its armor was small enough to fit in the corridor? I hear it's a huge metal box.”

I fell silent for a second, picturing it in my head. *I'm just guessing here, but I think it'll fit. It certainly won't be able to move around easily though, and it'll have trouble changing directions as well.*

“I think it'll fit,” I told the professor, “but its movements will be heavily

restricted. That will put us at an advantage.”

Clara averted her eyes. “Shouldn’t we have to do more work beyond just that?” she mumbled under her breath. “Lyle, how *do* you think up such unconventional—or maybe I should say underhanded—methods? I’m honestly jealous.”

I shrugged. I got all my propositions from a group of very underhanded men, so it wasn’t like I had any personal knowledge on the matter.

“Lyle...” the third head said slowly, seeming to pick up on my thoughts, “you just thought we were rotten, didn’t you? It showed on your face.”

“How *could* you, Lyle?” the sixth head demanded, his voice choked with false tears. “All of our scheming is for your sake!”

I felt the distinct urge to throw my hands up in frustration. *Then why don’t you stop making me the bait!*

Having had his fun, the sixth head quickly changed his tune. “Putting that aside...it’s not a bad plan. In fact, I have no idea why no one else thought of that. It seems blatantly obvious. Only idiots fight in conditions that favor the enemy.”

Well, for starters, I thought sarcastically, the plan hinges on running away from a foe we traveled forty floors to defeat.

There was also the fact that luring it into the corridor required a certain set of skills—if the job wasn’t done right, the person acting as bait could easily end up dead, which would ruin everything. With more members, there was no need to turn to such an unreliable strategy.

“To go back to the initial topic,” the second head chimed in, “generally speaking, I’d say all feudal lords have terrible personalities.”

“Indeed,” the seventh head added. “We can agree on that one. In fact, I’ll come out and say it—what’s wrong with having a terrible personality?!”

At this statement, my ancestors all began to laugh.

I seriously don’t get their sense of humor, I thought with an inward sigh. What’s so funny about being a deplorable human?

Truth be told, I had more important things to do than ruminate on my ancestors' strange outlook on life. I focused back onto Clara and the professor.

"Sounds like we're going to be using the corridor strategy again," I said. "In that case, I'll go in, and..."

As Novem prepared food for their party, she watched Lyle where he sat across the room. He appeared to be holding a strategy meeting with Clara and Professor Damian, although the latter of which seemed to have joined in of his own accord somewhere along the way.

He's leaving us out of things again, Novem thought with a sigh.

She couldn't be completely mad at Lyle, since consulting Clara and the professor on what to do was actually a good idea. Professor Damian in particular seemed incredibly capable as long as he was interested in something. And although Clara fell short when it came to the professor, she was still a bookworm with an abundant well of knowledge and a local adventurer to boot. She had all the necessary know-how to work out a plan of attack, and she knew more about Aramthurst's dungeon than anyone else.

When you considered this assortment of expertise, it was obvious why Lyle would take advantage of their knowledge. But that wasn't the problem. The issue was how Novem and the others felt, being kept out of the loop.

Novem glanced over at Aria and Sophia; they looked incredibly bored.

Milord, you really must take notice of how they feel, Novem thought, fervently wishing that Lyle would catch on. *They think you're neglecting them because they're too unreliable.*

Curiously enough, this was when Miranda decided to make her way over to the two girls. Novem casually looked away, endeavoring to make her eavesdropping less noticeable. To Miranda, Novem probably just looked like she was intensely concentrating on her cooking.

"Wait, are you sure?" Novem heard Aria say.

"Of course, it's fine!" Miranda responded. "Just make sure you do your best

tomorrow.”

“But having you take over for us so many times...” Sophia murmured hesitantly. “Aria, we should really turn her down.”

“Oh, come now, this is the only chance I ever get to contribute,” Miranda said cheerfully. Novem could almost hear the smile in her voice. “Can’t you just give this one little job to me? Pleeeeeeeease?”

Within a few minutes, Miranda had convinced both girls to let her do a variety of tasks in their stead. Then, she started toward Novem—it appeared her turn was next.

“Why don’t I help you out?” Miranda asked once she drifted over to where Novem was cooking. “It’s hard to do it alone, right?”

Novem smiled at her and nodded. “I’ll be counting on you, then.”

Before long, Miranda had proved a good assistant in the cooking process. From her masterful handling, it was clear she did housework on a daily basis. And yet, Miranda never once mentioned that she was helping out in place of the other two girls.

Am I making something out of nothing? Novem wondered. *Still, I can’t help but think...*

Miranda was suspicious. And Novem’s distrust of her was only increasing.

That night, Novem pulled me aside and gave me a report.

“Miranda did all that?” I whispered to her, matching her hushed tone.

I glanced at where Miranda lay curled up in a blanket at the opposite edge of the room.

Novem really must be wary of Miranda if she felt she needed to lead me this far away to have this discussion, I thought.

“Yes,” Novem whispered back. “Perhaps I may be overthinking it, but her behavior still bothers me. She’s cooperating for our sake, but...” She trailed off, seeming to struggle over how to convey her point.

Luckily for Novem, I could guess what was going on.

Are Shannon's orphic eyes...finally showing their effects?

"You can't say for certain that Miranda's the only reason those two have grown lax," the sixth advised, sensing my train of thought. "However, there's definitely a chance she has a hand in what's going on."

It was equally likely that Miranda had received orders from Shannon. When I'd observed them back in that hospital room, Shannon had appeared to be using powerful mental manipulation on her elder sister.

"So even if we wanted to physically separate them, it's too late..." I muttered.

"Milord?" Novem asked, not letting my comment slip by for a second. Her eyes were intense on my face.

I would have explained my words away if I could, but Novem didn't know all of the backstory behind Shannon's orphic eyes. To tell the truth, she was actually better off not knowing. I didn't want her to know that I was getting close to snatching away the eyes of a little girl.

In the end, I just shook my head. "It's nothing," I told her. "I'll be wary of Miranda, and you should be cautious of her as well."

Novem's eyes narrowed ever so slightly onto my face. It was an expression I was quite familiar with—she'd realized something. "Lyle, milord. Do you know something I don't?"

The second head whistled. "Atta girl, Novem. She's a sharp one. But it would be best if she stayed in the dark for this one."

"Girls in general can be very sharp, I'll have you know," the third head chimed in. "Still, just this once, I'd recommend keeping Novem out of the loop. Same goes for Aria and Sophia. Don't let those three get involved."

"Right," the fifth head agreed. "This is House Walt's problem."

Taking their advice to heart, I decided to try and joke off the whole situation.

"Well," I told Novem sheepishly, "I *do* remember doing something bad enough to deserve anything she has coming for me..." At Novem's dead stare, I raised my hands in mock defense. "I'm just kidding, okay? Don't glare at me."

Unfortunately for me, Novem seemed completely disinterested in letting me write everything off as a joke. She stared at me seriously, and I averted my eyes, scratching at my cheek.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” I finally said, a bit sullenly. “There’s still a chance she doesn’t have any ill intent. She’s already done so much for us, right?”

That seemed to be a point we agreed on. Novem nodded.

“Still,” the fourth head said, sounding surprised, “you really think Miranda’s the one who ruined that duo? Sure, she said she’d do their work for them, but...” He sighed. “I guess I can see why you think so. But if that’s actually what happened, what’s Miranda’s endgame here?”

“Well,” the seventh head surmised, “to me it sounds like she’s trying to indirectly break up Lyle’s party, instead of using more direct means. She’s surprisingly conniving.”

“There’s no way Miranda would do that when she takes so much after Milleia!” the sixth head shouted. There was a loud *thud*, which I assumed was the sound of his fist smacking into the table. “You knew Milleia too, didn’t you, son?”

“Well, yes...” the seventh head hesitantly replied. “I admit that there’s a chance Miranda’s only acting this way because she’s being manipulated by Shannon, but when it comes to Aunt Milleia’s personality...” There was a long pause. “How do I put this...?”

Seems like he’s dancing around the topic, I thought, intrigued.

“In any case, you need to be careful, Lyle,” the fifth head broke in, taking charge of the group for once. “That’s about all you can do for now—there’s no telling what Shannon is plotting. Just make sure that whatever happens, you have the resources to deal with it.”

I nodded. No matter what happened, I was going to do everything in my power to avoid having to fight Miranda. I hated the thought of hurting such a kind soul.

The next day had dawned, and my entire party was now standing at the ready just in front of the boss room on the fortieth floor. Before we entered, however, I wanted to go over the plan one more time.

“I’ll lure the boss out into the hallway again,” I began. “Once it enters the corridor, then—”

“Then we get on top of it just like before, and pin it down,” Aria said in a bored tone, swiftly prattling off the rest. “Same old, same old.”

If I’m not mistaken, Aria sounds a little irritated, I thought. My eyes flickered from her to Sophia.

“I understand,” the other girl said shortly. Her voice was oddly stiff, and she seemed angry too.

Not knowing what to do, I just stammered, “A-All righty then. I’d like everyone to standby a short distance down the hall. And if our plan fails, professor, I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me,” Professor Damian said, tapping his staff against his shoulder. He gave a happy nod. “Man, I never thought I’d get the chance to fight the boss this soon. I was right to leave it to you guys—no, *you* specifically. Thanks for introducing him to me, uh... Umm, who were you again?”

I winced. *I know Professor Damian was just trying to be nice, but it kind of undermines the point if he can’t remember Miranda’s name...*

“My name is Miranda, professor,” she said. “I have perfect attendance in your class. At this point, I really don’t know what else I can do to get you to remember me.”

Miranda gave the professor a rueful smile. It was clear she’d practically given up on him when it came to this matter.

“Oh, that’s right!” Professor Damian said with a laugh. “Well, I don’t remember a single student I’ve ever taught, so don’t let it get to you. In any case, if those two fail, I’ll pin it down with my dolls. That should at least buy us some time. This is all for the Demonic Stone, so I’m willing to break a leg.”

He’s eternally faithful to his own desires, I thought with an inward laugh. *It’s*

almost refreshing, in a sense.

With the professor's role settled, I turned to Novem next. "Please guard Clara. And keep in mind that, if the situation calls for it, we may have to retreat one floor up."

Novem nodded, but eyed me anxiously. She'd accepted that I was to act as bait, albeit begrudgingly. The reason was simple—there wasn't anyone else suited for the job.

"Just please don't do anything crazy," Novem said softly.

Seeing the fear on Novem's face, the fourth head stirred inside the Jewel. "We're going to have to solve this problem too, eventually." He sighed. "All of a sudden, it feels like issues are cropping up left and right."

I ignored him and returned Novem's nod. Then, without any further ado, I entered the boss room.

My first step was cautious; my eyes flickered all over the space, warily watching for any movement. And yet...nothing happened.

I took a second step, and then a third.

"Still nothing?" I mumbled under my breath, tension rising in my chest.

Weirded out by the boss's lack of reaction, I pulled out my bow and a burst arrow, then fired it at the still form of the large metallic box.

The projectile burst upon contact, sending a massive *boom* echoing through the room. But...that was it. It hadn't managed to mar the metal surface in the slightest.

"Seems awfully hard," I muttered.

I took a deep breath and gathered my resolve, then began to cautiously approach the monster. Within a few steps, the box finally came to life.

I froze as a clattering sound rang through the boss room, growing louder and louder with every passing second. Finally, it stopped, and the sharp sound of metal grating on metal pierced my ears as one of the box's flanks screeched open. An identical door opened on the opposite side of the monster, and from within each of the two openings, four hairy legs emerged, delicately settling

against the ground.

Next, a hatch slid open on the top of the box, from which a sinister face soon peeked out. It had two red eyes, and a crescent-moon of a mouth. It was...smiling.

Shaking myself into motion, I carefully pulled out a second burst arrow and fired it at the monster's exposed legs.

Unfortunately, the attack once again had no effect. The monster just shook it off, then used its spider legs to hoist the entire hefty metal box into the air.

"Guess that's not going to work," I said ruefully. "And, wait—this thing actually *is* a spider in a box."

As I spoke, the humanoid figure peeking from the top hatch was slowly inching out of the inside of the box, revealing more and more of itself. The first things I saw were its thin torso and strange, uncanny head, but I noticed its arms only seconds later. They were slender, but ended in unnaturally large hands.

"Ksh ksh ksh," the monster ominously hissed.

It took me a few seconds, but I realized with horror that it had been laughing. A chill went down my spine—seeing the way it watched me, its tongue swiping over its lips, really rubbed me the wrong way.

I tucked away my bow, then slowly tried to back away...and the monster immediately sputtered into motion, its eight legs scuttering into position to chase me.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" I asked with a tight grin.

I quickly triggered a few of my Arts to get away, but the floor boss—let's call it a "box spider" since it's a spider in a box—just scurried after me even faster.

"Do your best, Lyle!" the third head cheered, laughter in his voice. "If you get caught, you're a goner!"

Ignoring him, I chucked my quiver, which was full of burst arrows, at the monster—it had been a pricey purchase, but there wasn't much else I could do at this point. Especially if I was going to survive the flood of half-hearted

encouragement coming from inside the Jewel.

There was a *thunk* as the quiver hit the ground in front of the box spider's legs, then a wave of explosive *booms* the second the monster stepped on it.

One explosion had been ineffective, but I was banking on a whole chain of them having some sort of an effect.

If nothing else, it seems like it was enough to stop the box spider temporarily, I thought, eyeing its motionless form over my shoulder as I ran.

Still, I couldn't tell how much damage had been done, if any at all, since the box spider was obscured by the wave of smoke the burst arrows had released when they exploded.

I turned my focus to the area in front of me, slipping back into the corridor that led to the boss room with a few more racing steps. Then I tore my sabers from their sheaths, spinning around to see the monster I knew was behind me.

It was standing in the doorway between the boss room and the corridor, one of its humanoid hands propped against the wall. It was staring straight at me, still hissing with laughter.

The records were right, I thought. *It does seem like an incredibly cruel monster—it seems intent on tormenting me. Unfortunately for it, though...*

"You're the one getting hunted!"

Two women came falling from above, one with red hair and one with black. They both landed on the box spider's back with a *thud*.

The humanoid portion of the monster whirled around a full one hundred and eighty degrees, staring at the two women now standing on its back.

Aria shifted in front of Sophia in order to protect her, her spear at the ready. "This thing creeps me out," she muttered.

Sophia placed her hands on the box. "It was already heavy to begin with... If I just...!"

Using her Art, Sophia made the metal box increase exponentially in weight. Before long, the box spider's legs could no longer endure, and it was forced to let the metallic portion of its body fall to the floor. Unable to do anything else,

its eight spindly limbs flailed around in a panic.

“All right!” I called out, confidence filling me. “Just keep at it!”

But then, just as I thought things were going to work out in our favor, things took a turn.

The box spider swung its long arms, knocking Aria and Sophia to the floor. As soon as they landed, the back of the metal box blew open, revealing the spider’s thorax. Piles of sticky thread spewed forth, wrapping around the girls’ limbs and locking them in place. They were left struggling on the floor.

“Th-This is—!”

“Get this stuff off me!”

My hands clenched around my sabers. From where I stood, it seemed like neither of the girls were injured, but there was no way they were going to be able to move around tangled up like that.

I quickly jumped aboard the metallic box as the spider, whose weight had been reverted now that it had cast Sophia off, began to thrash about. The corridor was too restricted for it to turn around, so it tried bouncing up and down to shake me off. The humanoid portion of the monster swung its arms at me as well—it seemed irritated to have yet another person on its back.

“Quit it!” I snarled as its arms drew closer.

I was in a pretty ugly situation now—I was fighting on unsteady footing, and the box spider’s whirlwind of attacks had put me on the defensive.

Then, suddenly, the monster came to a stop. I glanced over to see that Professor Damian’s dolls had grabbed hold of its legs.

Professor Damian took a casual swing at it with his staff. “There,” he called happily, “my job’s done! The rest—”

“Is up to me!” I finished for him.

I clenched my sabers, ready to fight the monster’s humanoid portion for real this time.

Sensing my intent, the box spider’s face contorted with rage. It started taking

large swings at me with its strange, slender arms.

I whipped my saber forward and tore the blade clean through one of the monster's whirling appendages, grinning when its red eyes flared wide. It swung its remaining arm in my direction, but it failed to hit me as well—I casually sliced it off with my other saber.

"You're going down," I said in a low, triumphant voice.

I swung both my sabers this time, slicing through the monster's neck and chest. Its thrashing legs stopped moving, sending the metallic box crashing to the floor.

Elated, I sheathed my sabers, and reached up to wrap my hand around the Jewel.

"Lyle!" Clara screamed, "watch out! That thing is—"

Even as the words slipped from Clara's mouth, I pulled the Jewel from around my neck. The rarium around it melted, shifting into the shape of the founder's silver greatsword just as the box spider slipped its body out of its protective casing.

As we watched, the box spider severed all the legs that Damian's dolls had a hold of, freeing it from their hold. And *that's* when the monster's true, vile form was revealed.

Its main body was cube-shaped, having been molded to the inside of the metallic box. The flat surfaces of its form were covered with a large mouth and a plethora of goggling eyes. It was a simple shape, all things considered, but a tad uncanny in its simplicity.

The moment I processed the sight of the monster, I gripped my greatsword and leapt into the air above it. "Unfortunately for you, I've done my research!" I cried, stabbing down into its body. "I know all about how you try to run in the end!"

The quivering, rampaging blade that was the founder's greatsword struck deep into the monster's flesh, its erratic movements tearing the stab wound wider and wider.

The monster let out a shrill scream as the blade dug deeper. It writhed in pain, its remaining legs thrashing. Then, finally, it fell still.

I reverted the silver greatsword back into its Jewel form, and glanced downward—I'd been showered in the spider's sticky bodily fluids. As I examined myself, I also noticed that the now dead monster was expelling long stretches of string from its backside.

Miranda wandered over to get a closer look at our prize, her eyes locking in on the string once she'd caught sight of it. "Oh, come to think of it, this is a pretty valuable material, isn't it?" she asked.

Professor Damian ignored her—he seemed entirely uninterested in the string. Instead, he was after the monster's Demonic Stone, and as such, he immediately started dismantling the spider.

After giving the professor a long look, Clara came up to me and explained, "Miranda's correct. When this monster dies, you either get a lot of very sturdy thread or a lot of incredibly adhesive thread. This time...it seems we've gotten the sturdy one."

From what Clara told me after that, both were quite valuable, and sold for a high price.

"Why is such an obscure material worth so much?" the second head asked, sounding puzzled. "I mean, it's not like it's rarium—there aren't too many uses for it. Not to mention you need to go through a lot of effort to obtain it, so you don't have a stable supply route. Will anyone really want this string?"

"Well, most likely it's so valuable because they found something that it's useful for," the third head said absently. "Still, that's quite an amount it's spitting out."

Seeing that I was too tired from using the silver greatsword to move, Novem took the initiative in heading over to Aria and Sophia, who were still trapped in the spider's silk.

They're, uh, making quite a scene... I thought, feeling a bit odd. The way that they're squirming, their clothes pushing up against their bodies... If I had to describe in one word, I think I'd use...incendiary? The fact that they really are

desperately trying to get out just makes it worse...

“S-Someone save me!” Aria cried.

Sophia seemed to be taking a more analytical approach, trying to unweave the thread’s tangles. “If I pass this one through here, and put this one...” She sighed. “This is hopeless! U-Ugh, my chest hurts...! The thread, it’s digging into me...”

Since the sticky thread was sticking to their clothes, as the girls thrashed, certain parts began to, well, slip out. To put it simply, it was risqué.

Novem was doing her best to set them free, but she didn’t seem to be making much progress. “Please, stop moving around, both of you,” she muttered. “If this is how it’s going to be, we should just cut off the parts of your clothing the thread is stuck to...”

That was *definitely* beyond what I was allowed to see, so I turned my eyes toward the professor. He was covered from head to toe in the box spider’s blood and guts, but he didn’t seem to be perturbed at all. In fact, he had a glorious smile on his face as he held a large red Demonic Stone to his chest. He was even rubbing his cheek against it.

Wow, I thought. It’s so large he can barely hold it, even cradling it in both his arms. And the red hue is so crystal clear! It almost looks like a precious gemstone.

The professor let out an odd, slightly evil laugh. “Now that I have this, I can *finally* activate—!”

THUNK!

Everyone whirled around, turning toward the sound. It seemed something had fallen into the boss chamber.

After a quick scan of the area, we found the item at hand sticking out of the floor. At first glance, it was quite a mysterious object—it was what appeared to be a metal coffin, although its sheen was closer to gray than silver. Similar to a real coffin, it had a window placed into the portion of the lid that would be over the corpse’s face. Normally, you could peek into such a window and gaze at the face of the poor sap inside, but this one was all fogged up—we couldn’t make

out a thing.

Everyone but the professor was quick to fall into a fighting formation, the possibility of a monster lurking inside running through our minds. Once we had the “coffin” surrounded, I warily approached it, running a hand over its surface. But there was no reaction.

The professor casually strode over to my side, the massive Demonic Stone still in his grasp.

“We’re not clear of danger yet, professor,” Miranda warned him.

He grinned at her, widening his eyes in mock surprise. It was clear he didn’t feel as if he was in any danger whatsoever.

“This is a surprise,” the professor said with glee. “I never thought we’d manage to obtain another one of these here. It happens in dungeons from time to time: after you defeat a boss, a treasure just drops out of the sky. Rare drops, as some call them...and this one is *truly* rare. A precious item indeed. Even the Academy only has two of them.”

“You know what this box is?” I asked him.

“*Know it?*” the professor asked, raising his brows. “I have one myself! The whole reason I was after this Demonic Stone had to do with one of these exact coffins. Using it, I can wake up the creature inside my coffin. But, well, you know...L-Lyle, was it? You’re a very lucky boy. How about it? Do you want to wake yours up too?”

Wake what up, exactly? I wondered.

The professor’s explanation had only left me more confused. Meanwhile, Clara and Miranda were losing it. “Professor Damian remembered someone’s name!” I could hear them shouting in the background.

“To explain,” Professor Damian continued, “this may look like a coffin, but you won’t find a human inside. It actually contains an automaton, or lifelike doll. They look human, but they’re actually machines who move on their own. The construction it takes to make them is incredibly elaborate—that much, we’ve managed to figure out. My interest lies in gaining the knowledge and technology needed to produce one of them on my own—that’s why I wanted to

activate mine. I needed this thing, though,” Professor Damian said, hoisting up the Demonic Stone in his arms, “to produce the amount of energy required.”

The professor leaned forward, peering into the coffin.

“An automaton made by the ancients...” he murmured. “Don’t you want to see it for yourself, Lyle?”

A smile spread across the professor’s face, a smile spurred by raging curiosity.

After that, we quickly stuffed all our supplies into the metal portion of the box spider. I’d gone ahead and used my mana to trigger Box, and the magic circle that went along with the Art currently shimmered beneath it.

Now, the conversation had turned to what we needed to keep with us, and what we could do without. I idly listened, but didn’t actually participate.

“Ah, this is hopeless,” I sighed. “It feels storing all this stuff is just a bit over my limit.”

The main problem was the large metal exoskeleton we’d harvested from the box spider. We’d decided to bring it back with us, but unfortunately...it seemed it was a bit too much for what my version of Box could handle, at least on top of everything else we had stored in there. Thus, the current conversation—we needed to reorganize our luggage just enough that it would fit.

As everyone chatted, I saw Novem give the coffin we’d just obtained a strong kick, stuffing it farther inside the box spider’s metal exoskeleton.

That’s unusual for her, I thought, a bit shocked.

“Why’re you kicking it, Novem?!” I asked her, dismayed. “We’re going to activate it later, so we should be careful with it.”

Novem turned to me with a smile. “My apologies, milord. It just...happened.”

It “just happened”? I thought in disbelief. *So basically, she kicked it on a whim. Is she frustrated over something, perhaps?*

Still, I guessed I should be thankful—now that nothing was jutting out, I just barely managed to store the items away. The exoskeleton, the coffin tucked

safely inside, slowly sank into the magic circle. As soon as it vanished, Novem stepped forward and propped me up.

The monster's Demonic Stone was still tucked tightly in Professor Damian's hands. It was clear he didn't have the slightest intention of letting anyone else touch it.

Well, it's still early in the day, and we've gotten our things in order for the return trip now, I thought. Time to figure out how we're going to go about our upward climb.

Aria seemed to be on the same train of thought as me. "We're heading up now, I know," she said, "but what's our plan for today? I think if we pick up the pace, we can probably make it all the way to the transfer device on floor twenty-five."

"We should set our sights on floor twenty-nine," Clara said, shaking her head. "If we're unlucky, the thirtieth floor's boss may have revived already—the number of days it takes to come back can fluctuate. That means our plan will have to change based on the state of floor thirty, but if the boss isn't there, we should spend the night on floor twenty-nine to secure our safety."

Sophia cocked her head. "Why's that? We're just pulling out, right?"

Clara pressed up her glasses, correcting their positioning. Her face turned serious as she looked over at us. "Dungeons are places where no one else is watching. It's most common for people to be attacked by their colleagues—i.e., fellow adventurers—when they're heading up and out. It's harder for parties to move around with a bunch of extra materials on hand, and most of the time they're exhausted from the first half of their trip. That makes them easy targets. Once we move past the twenty-ninth floor, we're more likely to run into other parties—we should be careful, just in case."

Clara's right, I thought. We should keep an eye out. We wouldn't want to get attacked and end up having all the materials and Demonic Stones we collected get snatched by some random other party. I sighed. *Sounds like the humans are going to be just as much of a pain as...no, more of a pain than the monsters.*

Sophia nodded, having understood Clara's point. Her expression had gone dark.

“Well then,” said Novem, breaking the tension a little. “Let’s head for the twenty-ninth floor. Is that all right with you, milord?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I agreed. “Anyone else have any objections?”

I glanced around at all my other party members, but something about Miranda’s body language made me pause on her for a moment. She was smiling the same smile as she always was, but for a split second, something had been off. It was like the air around her had shifted.

That’s when I realized that it was the sixth head’s Art, Search, which had registered the difference. It was an Art that could distinguish between enemies and allies based on whether a person held any hostility toward the user or not. And, just for that one short second...Miranda’s dot had gone red—the color given to enemies.

Sensing my eyes on her, Miranda said, “I’m fine with Clara’s plan. Having come so far, I wouldn’t want to be attacked at the very end.”

I looked away, wariness filling me. On the surface, Miranda hadn’t changed at all. But there was no denying that for a moment she’d held clear hostility toward me.

The fifth head heaved a deep sigh. “Lyle, you better be careful from now on,” he warned. “Don’t drop your guard until the very end.”

I quietly gripped the Jewel, signaling my assent.

By the end of the day, the party had managed to get themselves to floor twenty-nine, and had found a safe room to camp out in. Now, with everything set up and the group fully settled in, Aria was taking some time to wipe herself down with some hot water Clara had prepared for her. Meanwhile, the men were both asleep—Professor Damian with his arms wrapped around his Demonic Stone.

As she brushed the water out of her hair, Aria looked over at Lyle. “Did he go to bed without dinner?” she asked. “Must’ve been pretty tired, then.”

Aria’s question prompted Novem, who was preparing the food, to glance over

at Lyle herself. Seeing that his blanket had come off, she stood and softly padded over to where he lay. After carefully pulling his blanket back over him, she leaned forward and delicately wiped the sweat from his brow.

It's like she's his mother, Aria thought, slightly weirded out. Well...they have known each other for a long time. Maybe that's why their dynamic is like that...?

Still pondering over their relationship, Aria approached the fire. The flames burned without any firewood to fuel them—or anything else, for that matter. Apparently, Clara could sustain them that way, as long as she used the Demonic Tool she'd brought with her. The unfed flames could be used for heat, and cooking as well; overall, Aria had to admit they were a highly convenient tool to have on hand.

“Being able to use an Art to conjure flames like these is really quite convenient,” Aria commented to the others. “All you need is some Demonic Stones to power the Tool, right? Maybe we should buy one for ourselves.”

Miranda didn't react—now that Novem had stepped away, she was watching over the pot in the other girl's stead. Clara, however, looked up from her book.

“Demonic Tools like these are plentiful in Aramthurst,” she explained, her eyes on her lantern. “There's plenty of Demonic Stones and rarium to go around here, so the city's an optimal environment for development.”

Aria nodded and followed the other girl's eyes to the lantern. From what Clara had told her, it could produce light if Demonic Stones were fed into it. They only used it while they were resting or camping, though, since the lights Clara could produce from her arm were brighter.

“Aria,” Miranda said finally, looking up from her cooking. “You're going to take the next watch, right? You should go ahead and have a bite to eat.”

Aria glanced over to the entrance to the room, where Sophia was doing lookout duty. The other girl could have sat down if she'd wanted to, but instead, she'd placed the head of her battle-axe on the floor and was standing with her hands resting on the end of its pommel.

Jeez, she's such a serious girl. Just because she dozed off once... I mean, it's not like Lyle hadn't already made sure we were safe. She could relax, at least a

little bit.

Aria had no fear that they would be attacked. She had full trust in Lyle's capabilities, and anyway, his scanning abilities were too overpowered for something like that to happen.

Clara's book closed with a soft thump, and the girl leaned forward and took a bowl of soup out of Miranda's hands. "Once I eat, I'm going to sleep," she declared, then turned to Aria with serious eyes. "Aria, I'm sure you know this already, but keeping watch is a very important role."

"I-I know that!" Aria stammered, panicking at the blatant call out. She snatched her share of soup from Miranda and quickly began swallowing it down.

A few minutes later, Novem returned. As Aria stood and prepared to take over the watch, she heard the other girl thanking Miranda for watching over the pot for her.

A short while later, Miranda scanned her eyes around the room, confirming that the entire party was fast asleep. Aria, who was sitting in the lookout spot Sophia had only recently vacated, was snoring. Novem was knocked out too, her back resting against a wooden crate.

Miranda stared at the two girls, satisfaction in her eyes. It felt good to be the only one left standing, especially since both of them had intended to stay awake.

"The drug in the professor's drink seemed to take care of him just fine, and Clara drank the soup," Miranda said clinically, ticking off the last two party members on her list aloud. "Neither of them will be getting up anytime soon."

Miranda stood, emotionlessly drawing the dagger from her hip. Then, without a moment's hesitation, she headed straight over to Lyle. He was still lying in the same place as he had been before, wrapped up in a blanket. He was the only one of the party who hadn't drunk her spiked soup, as he'd been terribly weary by the time they'd made camp. He'd fallen asleep practically as soon as they'd settled in.

“It must be rough, doing it all on your own,” Miranda murmured. “Taking all that responsibility onto yourself means you tire out far quicker than any of the others. You must be feeling so, so fatigued...” She crouched down, gazing closely at the sleeping boy’s face. “Now then, Lyle—it’s about time you take responsibility for making a fool out of me.”

Quick as a flash, Miranda struck. Her dagger, which was clutched in her hand in a reverse grip, whipped forward, heading straight toward Lyle’s vitals. It was a sharp, unerring strike. And yet...when her blade struck home, the only thing it managed to pierce was the fabric of Lyle’s blanket. There was a metallic *clink* as the dagger’s tip hit the hard surface below.

“Oh dear...” Miranda crooned. “Seems you were awake.”

It seemed Lyle had been somewhat prepared for her attack—he’d rolled out of the way the moment she’d swung her dagger toward him, and was now standing a few feet away, facing her with a saber in one hand.

Miranda glanced over at a distant crate, where Lyle’s original two sabers rested. She’d collected them both and placed them there while she’d thought he was asleep.

“You were hiding a spare weapon,” Miranda commented. “That means you must have been wary of me.”

Sweat had gathered on Lyle’s brow, and he seemed clearly flustered by her attack. Still, it was obvious he’d been suspicious of her—he wouldn’t have made such preparations otherwise.

“Novem told me you’d been acting suspicious,” he admitted. “And then...there’s Shannon’s eyes.”

Miranda chuckled. “Oh, so you knew about that? Well, come to think of it, those eyes were passed down from our great-grandmother; that means they originally came from House Walt. I guess it would be stranger for you *not* to know about them.”

Miranda drew another dagger, then fell into a fighting stance. She now had a blade clutched in each of her hands.

That saber looks to be of a far lower quality than the ones I stole from him

earlier, Miranda thought, beginning to analyze her opponent as Lyle braced himself for a fight. *Well, I'm sure to him it's better than nothing.*

"Miranda, please, snap out of this," Lyle said, his voice sorrowful. He was wielding the saber's scabbard in his left hand, while he brandished the sword in his right. "This isn't you—you're a very kind person at heart."

Miranda couldn't help but make a face at that. *Umm, what?* she thought.

"Lyle, what are you talking about?"

Lyle leaned forward, eyes insistent. "I know you're being manipulated by Shannon, Miranda. But if you're true to yourself, and stay strong—"

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Miranda bent over, clutching at her stomach. She was leaving herself wide open for an attack, but she couldn't stop laughing.

What drivel! But, oh, now I see—he doesn't know. He still hasn't realized the truth about Shannon...

Miranda glanced up, a mad grin on her face, only to see that Lyle had let his weapons sag to his sides. He was just staring at her, a blank look on his face.

Not one to waste an opportunity, Miranda pounced forward, slashing her dagger at Lyle. Her blade let out a metallic screech as it locked with his saber.

"You're a fool," Miranda said, her voice mocking. Her eyes stared straight into Lyle's, their faces only inches apart. "Did you honestly believe I was a good girl?"

Surprise ripped across his face. "What is tha—?"

Miranda unleashed a vicious kick toward Lyle's gut, cutting his words off prematurely. The impact was too light for her liking, though—he'd jumped back in time to lessen her blow.

He really is strong.

"It sounds like you're wary of Shannon, but if you want my opinion, *she's* the one who's too kind." Miranda's head tilted ever so slightly to the side, even as she ripped the wool from Lyle's eyes. "Did you never once think that you should

be paying closer attention to somebody else?”

Chapter 52: The Circry Sisters

Is she telling me I should have been keeping an eye on her, and not Shannon? I wondered, warily eyeing the woman in front of me.

Miranda laughed, eyes gleaming as she braced herself for another attack. “You really are such an idiot. I’ll commend you for noticing Shannon’s eyes, but that’s all the praise you’re going to get from me. You don’t understand anything—you’re nothing more than a child who knows how to fight.”

I bent forward a little, taking a quick accounting of everything I had on hand. Equipment-wise, I had a dagger and my spare saber, which I had clutched in one of my hands. I was still dual wielding the blade; its scabbard was tucked into my off hand. Other than that—

“Tsk!”

Miranda’s dagger slashed at me again, and I parried it with my saber. Using my free hand, I tried to smack her with the scabbard, but she dodged it and lurched out of the way.

She knows what she’s doing, I thought. *She’s clearly accustomed to battle.*

“Somehow I doubt a student who just learned a bit of fighting on the side would have combat skills this advanced,” I commented, dodging another slash of Miranda’s blade.

“I told you, didn’t I?” Miranda quipped. “I’m good at pretty much everything. I’ve...” She ducked low, skillfully avoiding another strike I’d taken at her with my scabbard. “I’ve never struggled with anything before. As long as I have the chance to try something out, I can generally learn how to do it, no problem.”

Miranda launched a roundhouse kick at me, which I blocked with my arm. I violently whipped my scabbard back at her, but the blow didn’t land—she caught it on one of her daggers.

In the midst of the fighting, I suddenly heard the sixth head’s disbelieving voice trickling from the Jewel, which was swinging back and forth wildly across

my chest. “This...this can’t be. It has to be a lie. Miranda’s the spitting image of Milleia, she—”

“Lyle, you’ve got to apprehend her!” the fifth head cut in, ignoring the other man entirely. “We can’t be sure that she’s not being controlled.”

“Can you use my Art, Lyle?” the third head asked. “It might be able to disrupt the effects of Shannon’s mental manipulation.”

To be honest with you...yeah, there’s no way.

I might’ve gotten a small amount of rest, but since we’d entered the dungeon, I’d been wringing my mana dry each day. I was still fatigued; my mana had barely recovered. I’d likely only be able to fight at full strength for a few minutes.

Still, I should at least try... I thought, staring at Miranda as I chanted, *Mind*, in my head.

She didn’t react at all—she just gave me a composed smile.

“It was completely ineffective?!” the second head exclaimed.

The seventh head sighed. “Yeah, that’s Aunt Milleia’s great-granddaughter. No doubt about it.”

I stepped forward, planning on going on the offensive this time, only to see Miranda tuck her dagger away. She pulled out a knife instead, hurling it in my direction.

That’s weird. It’s almost shaped like an arrowhead, I thought as it flew at me.

The mere sight of the weapon seemed to trigger something in the second head. “Don’t touch that!” he cried out, horrified.

Trusting in his instincts, I immediately dove to one side. The knife sank into the wall behind me, exploding on impact. Startled, I glanced behind me...and Miranda took advantage of my distraction, loosing a volley of knives in my direction.

I dodged back and forth, evading them all, and the world around me turned into a panorama of cracked walls, scorch marks, and plumes of black smoke.

“You’ve got good instincts,” Miranda said, her voice strangely thoughtful. “It’s almost like you’ve got eyes in the back of your head... Ah, yes, it’s that Art, All, isn’t it? How troublesome.”

I turned to her, but before I could say something, she continued, “Ah, I bet you’re wondering who I heard that from. Well...Aria and Sophia are honest girls, you know. All I had to do was buddy up to them and throw a few compliments in your direction, and suddenly there was nothing they weren’t willing to tell me. It helped that they felt indebted to me, and thoroughly inferior to you—that made it all so, so much easier.”

“Hold on,” the fourth head said, sounding startled. “Don’t tell me the reason those two got so relaxed was—”

“So you mean the reason they dropped their guard—”

“Was because of me, that’s right. It didn’t take much—I just had to lead them in the right direction. They must have looked so lazy after I started doing all their work for them. I even tested my sleeping pills on Sophia toward the beginning of our excursion; thankfully, no one seemed to think anything of it.” Miranda gave a happy sigh. “Yes, I’m glad it all went so well. Although, I should note that ruining the relationships between you and the rest of your party was also part of my intentions.”

I grit my teeth, even as shame filled me. I hadn’t trusted Aria or Sophia at all—I’d just convinced myself that the two girls were becoming complacent, without even wondering why.

“Still, you can’t blame the demise of your relationships all on me, Lyle,” Miranda continued. “You’ve got to admit you’re largely at fault as well. The way you’ve been acting, your party would’ve fallen apart even without my intervention.”

Eyes on my face, Miranda pulled out two more of those unique, arrowheaded knives she’d been using.

Wait, the shape of those blades looks similar to the heads of my burst arrows, I realized. But how is she carrying so many of them with her without them exploding?

Unfortunately there was no time to figure it out—Miranda plunged into motion, throwing one of her knives to the left, and one of her knives to the right.

She must have missed on purpose, I thought, eyes narrowing. But regardless, I've got to take advantage of the fact that she's standing in front of me, unarmed.

"Don't you mock me!" I snarled, darting forward. I was planning on restraining her before she got any more ideas, but ended up freezing in my tracks at a yell from the seventh head.

"Don't be so eager, Lyle!" he snapped, voice tight. "Her aim is—"

I didn't catch the rest, rattled by the successive explosions that came from behind me. The blast wave knocked me from my stance, even as my surroundings were wreathed in smoke. Then I felt something...not right, with my left arm.

"Ungh...!"

I looked down, my eyes landing on the dagger protruding from my skin. It didn't look like it'd gone in too deeply, so I quickly pulled it out and tossed it aside, even as I scanned the area for Miranda's location.

Thoroughly pissed now, I snapped, "Hiding in the smoke is pointle—"

There was a clatter as my scabbard fell to the floor. Shocked, I reassessed my left hand, which had gone suddenly numb.

"Huh? Why is...?"

My body began to shake uncontrollably, even as my left arm and shoulder went completely numb.

It's spreading across my entire body, I thought in horror.

Another volley of slender knives burst through the smoke then, followed by a line of long, sticky thread. I'd gone so numb at that point that there was no way for me to dodge—one knife thunked home in my right shoulder, while another sank into one of my thighs. As I gasped in a pained breath, the thread hit me as well, pinning my arms to my torso.

As I tried my best to wriggle free, the smoke rapidly cleared up, revealing Miranda as she slowly walked toward me. “This dungeon sure is making things inconvenient,” she said idly. “Here I am, aiming for a dust explosion, but the smoke clears up in no time at all. What is it that they say, something like, ‘Dungeons produce environments best suited for humans’? Seeing the principle in action is really quite something... Don’t you think, Lyle?”

I didn’t reply, just watched her warily as she slunk closer and closer to me. Then, all of a sudden, it was like I blinked and she appeared at my side; she drove her foot into my stomach, and I collapsed onto my back.

The threads have already hardened, I thought foggily. *At least I won’t be glued to the ground.*

To tell the truth, though, I couldn’t move regardless—my body was still too numb.

Looming above me, Miranda released another kick. This one was to my saber—it spun far away, out of my reach.

“Do you get it now, Lyle?” Miranda crooned, leaning over me with a smile. “Even if you can see everything I’m doing with your little Art, there are still plenty of ways for me to deal with you.”

Miranda sunk her foot into me a second time, sending me rolling onto my side. Paralyzed, my eyes drifted over to the sleeping forms of Novem and the rest of my party. Not a single one of them showed any signs of stirring.

“So she’s using a numbing agent *and* a sleeping agent,” the third head muttered, his voice tight with frustration. “That’s trouble. Can you move yet, Lyle?”

I couldn’t quite respond to him with Miranda observing me so closely, but he seemed to take my silence as an affirmative.

“Buy yourself some time if you can,” he continued. “That’s all you should be focusing on right now.”

Letting out a labored breath, I decided to take the third head’s advice. “Why...are you doing...all of this...?” I mumbled.

I turned my face slowly toward Miranda, my eyes skating over the knife sticking out of my left thigh. She stared back at me expressionlessly, a hint of condescension in her eyes.

“You want to know why?” she asked flatly. “Well, I’m going to force you to take responsibility for what you’ve done. Alongside a few other things, of course.”

I struggled to keep myself in a position where I could meet her eyes, trying to convey that I was listening, so as not to instigate her any further.

“Despite the type of person I am, I had quite a good impression of you when we first met, did you know that? All my life, I’ve played the part of the good little girl, keeping all my nasty, seething emotions pushed down deep inside me... But when I met you, I had to think, *Is this fate?! I mean, really, can you blame me?*”

Miranda reared back, her body twisting, and then catapulted another kick into my side. Her cheeks flushed pink with the pure exertion of it all.

I gasped in agony—the spot her boot had struck radiated excruciating waves of pain through me. It was like she knew exactly where to hit me in order to inflict the most intense pain possible.

“Oh, that was nasty,” I heard the fifth head say. “The pain lasts for a while if you hit someone there...”

All of a sudden, Miranda’s face went deadly serious. She picked up one of her knives and tossed it forward, watching idly as it sank deep into my skin. Then, eyes cold, she stepped on it.

“Urgh...! *Aaagh!*”

Seeing me writhe in agony made a small smile drift to Miranda’s lips. She leaned forward, using her weight to press the knife even deeper.

“Has the numbness worn off already?” she asked idly. “The agent I picked out was quick-acting, but I heard it doesn’t last long either. It would have been a waste if I’d used something that took a while to wear off—it would’ve dulled all that delicious pain you’re feeling. And *that* wouldn’t have been any fun at all.” Miranda leaned back, tapping a single finger against her lips. “Hmm... Right,

where were we? I think I was getting to the part where I pinned my hopes on you, Lyle. When I figured out you were the disinherited heir of House Walt.”

“Mnn... *Urgh!*” I moaned, trying to think through the pain. “Do you mean...because of...those talks of an...engagement, between us?”

Miranda smiled, twisting her foot back and forth and grating the knife even farther into my flesh. “Correct! Here, I’ll give you a reward.”

Before I could process what was happening, another knife sunk into me. This time, she’d gone for one of my calves. I gritted my teeth, the sound of my molars grinding filling my ears as I tried to breathe through the pain.

Miranda spat a sigh, folding her arms across her chest. “Here I was, thinking that I’d encountered *him*—the man who I could have married—by complete coincidence. When I went out to meet up with you that first time, I was so filled with hope, you know? I did my best—I even put on a bit of makeup. I did so much to prepare myself, and then...” Her face went dark. “You really are the worst.”

She kicked me again, the sharpness of the blow knocking the air from my lungs. I was still reeling when she leaned forward, slamming her boot down onto my head.

“Are you having fun, Lyle? Surrounding yourself with Aria, and Sophia, and your *actual* betrothed? As a man, you must be in heaven. But from my perspective? It’s absolutely unforgivable. Oh, they might keep quiet about it, but Sophia and Aria are both incredibly discontent. And Novem, your former fiancée who’s forced the whole thing upon you? Well...she’s quite a strange one, honestly.”

I couldn’t really offer any defense for Novem’s actions, but what Miranda had said about the other two brought me pause. I’d known they weren’t entirely content with the way of things—no, I’d known they were unhappy, but I hadn’t known over what.

“But why did you...go through...with such a convoluted...?”

Miranda pulled back, removing her boot from where it was pressing into my skull. Her face had turned truly sorrowful, wreathed in honest concern. “To get

vengeance, of course. Plus, I need to make Shannon understand how much power her eyes truly hold. If you all died, and only a small group ended up returning to the surface, she'll realize how much sway she really has. She seems to take delight in manipulating me ever since her power has awakened, but to be honest with you, she's quite weak in comparison to our great-grandmother. Judging by the records she left behind, I'd say Shannon's not drawing on even a tenth of her abilities."

Records...? I thought. I didn't even know any records existed...

"You really did your research..." I murmured.

"Well, Shannon couldn't see from the moment she was born," Miranda said simply. "Of course I'd look into the cause. All I had to do was trace back a little into our family tree. Honestly, it was a nice, simple process. That said, it appears my father didn't even know his own grandmother was blind." She scoffed. "He really is the most pathetic man. Why must I go to such trouble to take care of these things for him? But I digress. In any case, Lyle, I think you're pretty amazing. I'm surprised you know the secrets behind Shannon's eyes."

I...need to buy more time, I realized. I've got to keep the conversation going.

I looked up at Miranda and asked, "Does that mean you know everything, then? About the orphic eyes and whatnot?"

Miranda nodded. "How could I not notice that Shannon had them? We live together, after all. She seems to think I haven't figured it out but, well...I think that part of her is pretty cute. I've decided I'll allow it. I don't even mind that she's been doing all sorts of pranks on our caretakers and making them quit—she probably just doesn't want them getting wrapped up in our affairs. She's really very kind, you know?"

"Kind," I repeated doubtfully.

Slowly, carefully, I began to tilt myself to the side. I could feel one of the daggers Miranda had thrown at me before, lying loose beneath the hardened threads wrapped around my chest and arms. As I shifted, using the most minute movements I could muster, I could feel thread after thread slowly fraying beneath the blade's edge. All I needed was to twist a little bit more, and then I'd be free.

Seemingly oblivious, Miranda replied, “That’s right. Shannon’s stupid, and cute, and kind. Just like Aria. Sophia, well, she’s a different sort, but she’s adorable for the same reasons. Their cuteness comes from the fact that they’re all idiots.”

I felt a bit sorry for the three girls, having their personalities be derided like that, but I couldn’t say that I didn’t understand, just a little, where Miranda was coming from.

“Anyway, do you even know what it is Shannon’s trying to do?” Miranda asked.

I decided to go with the conclusion my ancestors had settled on. “She’s trying to get revenge against the house that wronged her,” I said tightly. “And the first step of that revenge was going after you, Miranda. Am I wrong...?”

Miranda tilted her head back and laughed. “Close,” she said, eyes shining, “but no cigar. The revenge Shannon’s after... No, the payback—it’s...”

I had to doubt my ears at what Miranda said next.

Back at the hospital where Shannon was staying, things were mostly peaceful. Oh, there’d been rumors spreading recently of a child ghost who roamed the halls at night, but that was the extent of things.

Meanwhile, Shannon chowed down on sweets, waiting for her sister to return.

“Sis, when are you coming home?” Shannon whined. “I hope she hurries up and takes care of them all quick. That way she’ll be able to come back soon. Although...that Lyle guy made sis really sad, so he deserves a lot of pain.”

Not just a lot, a whole ton! Only then will I forgive him.

This decided, Shannon’s thoughts shifted back to plotting how to get back at her house. It was a common train of thought, ever since her elder sister had begun to start doing as she commanded.

“Once sis comes back, we’ll go straight home and get back at them!” Shannon muttered to herself. “I’ll hide a bug in Doris’s dress, mark my words! And I’ll

doodle all over father's important papers, so he gets embarrassed at work! And then, *and then*, I'll blame it all on sis! She betrayed me and made me into a laughing stock... She deserves it. And after that, well...maybe I'll forgive her."

All of a sudden, Shannon recalled the nurse who'd stolen her candy. "Oh, that's *right*! I've gotta get back at that woman too! Hmm, what would be a good thing to do...? Bugs are scary, so she'd totally hate it if I did something with them, right?"

Shannon shifted her position in the hospital bed, until she was lying on her front with her chin resting on her hands. "C-Could I get someone to put a worm in her food?" She immediately shook her head. "No, that's going way too far. It's too much, even for me. But then, how can I make her suffer...?"

Shannon cradled her head in her hands, thinking madly. She wouldn't have imagined in a million years that, back in Aramthurst's dungeon, her sister was in the middle of trying to kill Lyle.

"Who was the bastard who made such a big deal over those orphic eyes again?" demanded the second head.

"Yeah," the third head agreed. "Honestly, I'm seriously creeped out that you guys wanted to crush her eyes just because she was being a little mischievous. I mean, that's bad, but not *that* bad."

"Indeed, she sounds harmless enough," the fourth head agreed. "Come, father, why don't you refresh our memories? How dangerous are the powers of those orphic eyes, now...?"

"Oh, shut up!" the fifth head spat.

"More importantly," the sixth head stressed, "why is Miranda acting like this?!"

"Well, if she takes after my aunt, I can't say I'm too surprised," the seventh head commented. "Still, this took a turn for the unexpected."

As my ancestors bickered inside the Jewel, I was still laid out on the ground of a room on Aramthurst's twenty-ninth floor, being tormented by Miranda. It was

clear that my fake pick-up attempt had led to something absolutely outrageous. That much, I understood. But I'd never thought that my grasp of the situation could be so utterly wrong.

Thinking back to how I'd told Miranda to "snap out of this," with a straight face, I felt a wave of embarrassment go through me. Miranda had been acting of her own free will from the start; in short, she was someone who possessed the innate ability to come up with and carry out devious and violent schemes. She was a bit of a—no, an *incredibly scary*—individual.

"Like I said, Shannon's harmless," Miranda said with a pithy sigh. "At most, she'd drop a bug down Doris's clothes, or mess with father's documents. Those are the worst things she can think of. But she isn't after our house at the moment—she wanted to get back at the woman who humiliated her. Your little sister. That's why I'm keeping watch over her out here."

"My little sister"...? She wants to get back at Ceres?

Seeing the furrow in my brow, Miranda smiled. "Oh, what a dreadful expression. Do you perhaps have some of your own bitter memories with that sister of yours?"

When I averted my eyes, Miranda placed a foot on my chest. The sole of her boot ground into my flesh as she looked over me with a broad grin. "Let's hear it then," she demanded. "What happened to the poor boy who was disowned and kicked out of his own house?"

Just as Miranda finished speaking, I heard the third head say, "Lyle, you've stalled her long enough!"

Miranda lurched back and kicked me, sending me rolling again. There was a strange look on her face, almost as she was beginning to catch on. Unfortunately for her, it was too late.

"A dagger?" she murmured. "Don't tell me..."

I jerked forward, broke through my weakened restraints, and tore a dagger out of my flesh, sending it careening toward Miranda. She dodged it, but I'd expected her to. I took advantage of her distraction to run away, pain jolting through me with every step. My first destination was the crate where Miranda

had placed my weapons, but...I ran into something along the way.

Numerous thin strands of wire-like material stretched over where Novem and the rest of my party was resting, which also just so happened to be where my sabers were stored. There were so many of the strands, placed so erratically, that there was no way I was going to find a way through them.

“What is this stuff?” I asked, turning to look at Miranda.

Judging by the grin on her face as she slunk toward me, these wires were yet another ace she’d been hiding up her sleeve.

“How unfortunate for you,” she crooned. “Looks like you can’t go any farther. Nor will you ever be able to leave this room alive.”

The one and only entrance to the room was beyond the wires, where Aria was soundly asleep. For her to not have woken up, even after all the noise Miranda and I had made...Miranda must have used quite a powerful drug.

As Miranda drew closer, I quickly extracted the remaining knives from where they were lodged in my flesh. “You...should really save your trump cards up until the very end,” I panted, doing my best to steady my breath.

In response, fine threads shot from the fingertips of one of Miranda’s hands. She swung at me, and when I dodged, the sticky thread from her hands stuck fast to the wires behind me that she’d laid in advance.

“You made all of these?”

Miranda didn’t reply; she just drew two daggers—one for each hand—and came at me. I had no choice but to use the same daggers she’d stabbed into me to desperately parry the flurry of slashes she launched my way. With every collision, sparks spattered between our blades.

Then, she changed her tactics—I caught sight of one long, shapely leg shooting toward me.

“*Enough* with the kicking!” I snarled, countering her with a kick of my own. To my dismay, she easily avoided it.

“What a woman,” the second head said with a whistle. “Jack of all trades, master of none? She’s far beyond that.”

He's right, I thought. It's obvious that she's a genius who can do anything she sets her mind to.

Regardless, said genius was trying to kill me. I tossed a knife at her, hoping to startle her enough that I could make my getaway, only to find my movements brought to a halt. Somehow, without my even realizing it, my left arm had been wrapped up in thread.

My eyes darted to Miranda, whose hand those threads were connected to. She grinned widely, pulling me toward her.

"You're not getting away, dear," she sang, her voice gleeful.

"So she's been concealing her Art this whole time?" the fifth head muttered. "She's like a spider."

Indeed, I thought, eyes narrowing. Or a spider woman more like. But regardless, I'm not letting things end here.

"I refuse to die here!" I screamed at Miranda. "Limit Burst!"

The second stage of the founder's Art activated, enhancing all my physical capabilities. I used the additional strength to lean backward, swinging my arm away from Miranda with enough force to throw her off her feet. Then, after ripping off the threads wrapped around me, I plucked up one of Miranda's daggers that had fallen to the ground.

There was just one problem. When I turned to launch my attack, I found three more arrowheaded knives soaring in my direction.

"O-Oh..."

BOOM.

For a brief instant, my surroundings were lit up with a bright light, and then they plunged into darkness, enveloped in black smoke.

Miranda slowly climbed to her feet, practically uninjured, as the cloud of black smoke spread across the entire room. Satisfaction poured through her at the sight. She'd thrown her knives in midair, as she was still falling to the earth after Lyle's wild jerk upon her threads. She'd even managed to surmount the blast

wave, by rolling across the ground and out of the way.

“Good grief,” Miranda said with a sigh. “What a troublesome child you are. Did you really have to end my fun?”

Miranda had really been enjoying herself, playing around with her exploding knives. She’d invented them herself not too long ago, using the burst arrows that resulted from her other students’ failed enchantments. It had taken her awhile, but she’d managed to increase their stability until they were of a usable level.

“Ugh, taking care of his corpse is going to be a pain,” Miranda muttered, sighing.

Beyond a surface level irritation, she seemed perfectly composed, but as the smoke rapidly cleared, her eyes darted around the room, and her grip on her dagger tightened. She pressed her back to a wall, her guard raised high.

The last of the smoke wisped away, and Miranda stared warily at the site of the explosion, where not a trace of Lyle could be found.

Don’t tell me he endured an explosion that powerful? she thought incredulously. *No one said anything about him having an Art like that.*

In fact, Miranda had assumed the opposite—going off of Lyle’s fighting style, it’d seemed obvious to her that he had no Arts that offered him any protection. Why would he place such a heavy emphasis on dodging her attacks if that wasn’t the case...?

But, no matter her thoughts, it was clear the man had vanished. A cold sweat broke out all over her body. And then...she realized something.

Miranda jerked back, her eyes going toward the ceiling, and caught sight of Lyle falling toward her, his saber at the ready.

“Too slow!” she snapped, blocking his powerful strike with crossed daggers.

Sparks scattered through the air as Lyle pushed back and landed on his feet. Before she had a chance to react, his leg swiped forward, knocking her feet out from underneath her.

Miranda grunted at the impact, then twisted her body in midair and kicked off

the wall. She ended up landing with both her feet on the floor, a good distance away from where Lyle stood.

“Got yourself a body-strengthening Art, huh?” she quipped, eyes locked on his.

Lyle grinned, his hands tightening on the grip of his saber, which was now stuck in the nearby wall. “Looks like I missed,” he said lightly.

Effortlessly, he changed the saber’s trajectory, pulling the embedded blade sideways through the wall until it came free. He left behind a massive gash in the process.

Miranda quickly crouched down, firing off a kick as she avoided Lyle’s next slash. But Lyle didn’t budge in the slightest.

“He’s turning out to be really difficult to handle,” Miranda muttered, turning to flee. As she turned, she saw that the gash was already regenerating itself.

This massive change is all because he’s using a strengthening Art, Miranda thought, eyeing him warily. Aria told me about it before, I remember, but this is...more than I imagined. Still, there’s no way he can keep it up for long. He’s already worn way too thin.

There was another shift that had occurred in Lyle, though, beyond his Art. Miranda could see it in the sharpness of his movements, in the way he swung his saber—he’d found the resolve he needed to kill her.

“Don’t you feel even a little reluctant to hurt me?” Miranda teased. “This is all happening because of what *you* did!”

“It’s true that I acted dishonestly,” Lyle admitted, voice calm. “But what about it? After all I’ve seen, there’s no way I could leave you to your own devices—it would be absurd. In fact, I’ve got to thank the goddesses for bringing us together. Now, I can get a woman like you off the streets.”

Miranda clenched her teeth. Without knowing it, Lyle had hit on a sore spot of hers. She’d always wondered, was it okay for someone like her, who was so emotionally volatile, to exist? It was a question that had eternally plagued her.

“I’m... I’m well aware that my personality is abnormal,” Miranda muttered.

How could she not be, when she spent day after day acting out the part of the ideal woman? All while the day's frustration bubbled and seethed, hidden away in the darkest depths of her heart. Eventually, all that anger had had to go somewhere, and it had manifested itself in Miranda's warped, two-faced nature. It was the cruel, cold face which hid behind her kind one.

But it appeared Lyle had no more mercy to spare for her—he came after her with a volley of vicious swings. Miranda parried them with her dagger, shooting another wave of threads from her free hand. These threads, however, were different from the others; they were short, light, airy things that looked like they'd be sliced through with a minimum of effort.

Within moments, the entire area around Miranda had been showered with the cotton candy—like floss. Weak in strength, but great in quantity.

Perhaps Lyle was wary of it, as he stopped his frontal assault.

Miranda laughed. “*This* is why I called you an idiot!”

All at once, the threads rushed forward, adhering to Lyle's body. The parts that covered him let out crackling sounds and snaps of blue light before burning away. His movements slowed, and the strength behind them faded.

“What *is* this stuff?” Lyle snarled, giving the burning threads a hateful look.

Miranda grinned, feeling quite cheerful. She dove into an explanation, even though this was certainly not the right time. “Ha ha ha! Did you know, Lyle, that humans—or all life-forms, rather—use the mana within their bodies to strengthen their physical capabilities? That means, if you stretch the term a little, that all life-forms are magicians of a sort—magic users, let's say. The threads I just made were set to burn, and they drained the mana from your body to do it. They should get in the way of your Arts too. Let me guess, you're struggling to fully muster your strength now, right?”

Miranda had expected a more sober response, but even as she scattered more white threads throughout the area, Lyle laughed. A chill ran down her spine.

Not a moment later, Lyle's body overflowed with mana. All the threads around him burst into flame and crumbled to dust.

“There we go,” Lyle said, satisfaction filling his voice. “I’ll just have to pour out so much mana these things aren’t an issue.” He turned to Miranda, his eyes narrowed. “Now, let’s end this, Miranda. I’ll send Shannon down after you soon enough.”

The face of her young sister flashed through Shannon’s mind. The Lyle in front of her, clad in bloodlust, wouldn’t pause for a second once he escaped the dungeon. He really would go kill Shannon, just as he’d said.

Not on my watch. I won’t let you kill that child!

“This isn’t over yet!” Miranda roared.

Throwing down her weapons, she produced a torrent of threads from both her hands. As if imbued with wills of their own, the threads began to gather and take shape as they covered her body.

“I still...have one thing...left!”

As Lyle came at her, Miranda unleashed her final trump card...

A short while earlier...

An immense, explosive *boom* came from across the room. I glanced up from the mountain of daggers and knives that I’d gathered, which had been littered all over the floor. Miranda still stood facing the wall, muttering something to herself. I heard a faint, plaintive “Don’t scare me like that...”

I hurried and dropped weapon after weapon through the gaps in Miranda’s wires, taking them out of the equation. Cold sweat had gathered all over my body as I did so, but the clattering sound of metal didn’t cause any of the dreamers to wake—not even Miranda. As a matter of fact, the sound even brought a satisfied smile to Aria’s sleeping face.

“What wonderful weapons!” the seventh head excitedly exclaimed. “What explosive might! We need some of that on our side.”

“Yeah, looks convenient,” the sixth head replied, voice flat. “Anyways, now that we know Shannon’s harmless, what should we do about Miranda? That’s who I’m more concerned about.”

During the battle, the fifth head had been teased relentlessly by the other ancestors—mainly the second, third, and fourth heads—so when he responded, his voice was filled with irritation. “I wouldn’t recommend getting rid of her. If possible, I’d suggest you just keep those sisters somewhere where you can keep a close eye on them.”

“That would mean Lyle would have to make sure they stayed by his side,” the fourth head said thoughtfully. “Is there really a need to go that far? All that stuff about orphic eyes turned out to be a misunderstanding. I’m not sure if we should trust you on this one...”

“‘Those eyes are dangerous,’” pantomimed the third head. “‘You might have to crush them,’ he said! And with such a mighty, cool look on his face too. And now here we are, with Miranda proving far greater of an issue than her poor little sister.”

“They really *are* dangerous!” the fifth head indignantly protested. “Listen here—they might be weak enough not to cause a problem right now, but are *you* going to take responsibility when something ends up going wrong?”

“Let’s get something straight,” the second head cut in. “Neither we nor Lyle are in any position to take responsibility for those things.”

You know, now that I think of it, he’s right, I thought, relieved. There’s no reason for me to go that far.

Still, I had other problems to solve. I stared mournfully at my sabers, which were still far beyond my reach. “They’re still way too far away,” I muttered. “What else can I use?”

I started rummaging through my clothes, then paused when I found a sweet treat tucked into one of my breast pockets. It was the same sort as the one Novem had given me when we first entered the dungeon.

My heart softened. *She must have snuck one in here so I’d have it for later.*

My eyes flickered over to where Novem sat, sleeping peacefully against a wooden crate. “I’m sorry for always causing you to worry so much, Novem,” I muttered, tossing the sweet treat into my mouth. I felt a bit of my strength return as the sweetness settled into my stomach. Then, I turned to stare

directly at the problem at hand.

Miranda teetered left and right, her expression incredibly grim as she fought some unseen foe.

“The third head’s Art really is incredibly effective,” I said lightly.

“Well, that’s just in its nature,” the third head said with an audible shrug. “I bet you’re glad you managed to buy some time with your little chat—you came pretty close to dying back there.”

The third head made the whole thing sound so casual and unimportant, but it had been no laughing matter for me. With that said...

“Limit Burst is seriously an incredible Art. All my wounds have already closed up.”

The second head sighed. “Yes, I’d venture to say it’s just as absurd as its original user,” he said. “It gives you strength *and* heals your wounds, with no drawbacks whatsoever.”

Miranda shifted abruptly, and my eyes shot over to her. *Looks like she’s trying to do something*, I thought. *How should I go about capturing her? I want to restrain her without injuring her, if possible, but...*

There was a clattering sound, and something came rolling across the floor toward me. Glancing up, I saw that Aria had dropped her spear in her sleep, sending it tumbling in my direction.

“Well done, Aria!” the second head cheered from within the Jewel. “You finally have a decent weapon.”

I reached out and picked up the spear, then turned back to Miranda. “How did a fake pick-up attempt lead to this?” I muttered.

“You should use this event to learn a bit about the potential consequences of your own actions,” the fourth head snapped, sounding surprisingly angry.

The third head laughed. “I don’t think even any of us could have foreseen things developing into this,” he joked, trying to lighten the mood. “Now then, Lyle...I know you were going through your rebellious phase, but since you’re the one who planted these seeds, you should also be the one to decide what to do

with them. Have you thought about what your next step is going to be?”

I nodded. Just as the fifth head had said, I couldn't leave either of the sisters on their own. I felt a bit of a fated connection to both of them, but more than that, I could tell just how concerned the fifth and sixth heads were for their futures.

“I'll at least take responsibility for what I've done,” I said firmly, walking up to Miranda and taking a stance with Aria's spear. “Let's end this, Miranda.”

Miranda's eyes unclouded, focusing onto me. She raised both her hands, producing strings from all ten of her fingers. “This isn't over yet!” she cried with surprising force.

Miranda's strings all burst to life, wrapping around her body over and over again. A wire-mesh structure formed; it almost looked like a skeleton. The structure soon vanished, though, buried under a pile of dirt seemingly amassed from all around the room. Miranda's lower body soon turned into a spiderlike form. Eight long, sinister legs soon extended to the ground, covered in a layer of dirt.

It was a far more bewitching form than that of the box spider. It reminded me of a monster I'd read of in a book before—an arachne.

“She really is a spider woman,” the fifth head muttered, dumbfounded.

“This form's pretty convenient inside a dungeon,” Miranda shouted. “I've gone down here like this so many times to let out my stress. I've torn through monster after monster...and now it's your turn!”

Miranda's dirt and thread legs moved like they were really alive, swinging across the floor in front of her. The ends were tipped by claws, which left long gashes in the ground.

I swung Aria's spear, narrowly managing to repel Miranda's attack, only for her to leap up and hang from the ceiling. A massive spider's web blanketed the area above me—Miranda must have shot string up there earlier, but she'd moved so fast I hadn't even noticed.

“Lyle, the straight spoke threads of a spider's thread are not sticky. But watch out for the spiraling ones,” the second head immediately advised.

Nodding, I scanned the ceiling, getting a better look at what awaited me. A number of webs had been pitched, situated as if to surround me.

“I’ll definitely end you here...” Miranda breathed. “Otherwise, you’ll...”

A shiver went down my spine. Her face and voice were the same as always, but something about her current form made everything she said infinitely scarier. Which made it even more strange to see the fear in her eyes as she looked at me.

I crouched down slightly, then launched myself upward and onto one of Miranda’s webs. Just as the second head had said, the straight threads that radiated from the center did not cling to me. I spread my feet between two of them; it felt like a sturdy enough position, even though the constant bouncing of the web made it hard to keep my balance.

“This isn’t looking too good,” the seventh head said. “She isn’t just imitating a spider’s form—she’s reproducing a spider’s movements too. How does that even work...?”

“Miranda,” I called out. “I want to apologize. For real, this time. What I did to you was wrong. Do you think you could ever forgive me?”

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*” Miranda violently shook her head, not even trying to listen.

“Even from the beginning, I thought you were truly beautiful, and kind... Before all this, I kept thinking that I would have loved to have a big sister like you. That was my honest opinion.”

Miranda raced across the web, charging toward me. I used the elastic bounciness of the threads to leap sideways, but she just immediately changed directions, scuttering toward me once more. All eight of her legs shuffled her forward, and she closed in on me just as a hunting spider would their prey.

“I wonder what illusion she’s seeing?” I muttered.

“Who knows,” the third head said. “But whatever it is, you’ve only got one thing left to do.”

That’s right. For now, I’ve got no other choice than to...

I ran across the web, jumping from section to section as I purposely let Miranda drive me into a corner.

“I’ve got you now!” she snarled, her legs churning as she got close enough to launch her final attack.

Seeing Miranda as she was now, I couldn’t help but realize how fiendish the Mind Art truly was. Her ability to make rational decisions had slowly leached away, and now all that was left was pure emotion.

Taking a deep breath, I rested both my feet on a single thread and readied Aria’s spear.

“Field...” I mumbled.

The second head’s Art activated, and my senses spread out, encompassing a wide swathe of the area around me. Using the new layer of sensory information, I could observe the internal workings of Miranda’s dirt and thread construction. It almost looked like it had a real skeleton inside.

“It’s over!” Miranda screamed, plunging toward me.

I took another deep, calming breath. “You’re right—it’s over.”

I can’t attack her full-out, since it would injure her, I thought, and the fifth and sixth heads definitely don’t want that. But if I only attack half-heartedly, then I probably won’t do her any damage at all. Which means, my only option is...

“You know, that contraption of yours is quite intricate, but...it’s not as stable as it looks.”

As Miranda came flying at me, I sprung forward, dodging her waving arms. I took Aria’s spear and stabbed it deep into the dirt covering her lower half, right where her spider thorax joined her upper body. Using Field, I could see this portion of her spider body was hollow, with one of her real legs positioned on either side.

Field had also informed me that this spot was where most of the weight of Miranda’s contraption had been concentrated, and where various important structures began to take shape. So, all I had to do in order to make her lower half collapse was pierce it roughly with Aria’s spear—gravity would do the rest.

It was the hidden weakness in her spider armor.

As her spider body came apart, Miranda stared on in disbelief. “It can’t be...” she shouted, then screamed as she was expelled entirely from the construction’s lower half. She’d been moving forward so fast that her momentum was unstoppable—if no one stopped her, she’d go crashing straight into the wall.

“Lyle!” the sixth head shouted, his voice desperate.

I acted at once, jumping into the path of Miranda’s flying body and snatching her up in my arms. I let out a grunt as my own back thumped against the wall, the crumbled fragments of Miranda’s spider body slamming into the space next to us. They collided with such force that the wall began to crumble, large cracks spreading along its length.

She really wasn’t holding back when she came at me, huh? I thought idly as my back slid down the wall. I only barely managed to recover my stance before I landed, Miranda still clutched in my arms.

“Seriously, how the hell does this kid pull stuff like that off so easily?” the third head muttered in a teasing tone. “How do you recover so quickly from something like that?”

I rolled my eyes. *Hey, I know how to land, thank you very much. You shouldn’t take my abilities so lightly.*

Now that we were on the ground, Miranda’s spider threads crumbled, seeming to melt into the air. As I held her, her sinister arms fell away as well, revealing her usual appendages.

It seemed we weren’t quite done fighting, as Miranda’s next move was to pull out a knife and take a slice at me. Although I unhanded her as fast as I could, she still managed to graze my cheek with the blade. I wiped away the trickle of blood with my hand.

“You haven’t given up yet?” I asked tiredly.

Miranda shook her head, stumbling farther away from me and standing on quivering legs. Her breath came in heavy pants, and she looked already thoroughly past her limits. It was clear her spider form put a great amount of

strain on her body.

“If I give up, then Shannon...” Miranda gasped in a halting breath. “I won’t let you kill her. *No matter what.*”

The sight of her so desperately protecting her little sister, her *family*, made my chest ache. “I’m not trying to kill anyone,” I told her gently. “And why’re you going so far to protect a family member who tried to manipulate you, anyway?”

Through her haggard expression, Miranda mustered a slight smile. “Because she’s stupid, but I think it’s cute. And...she doesn’t put any barriers up between us. Not even the rest of our family is so willing to shed their walls with me. My father, my sister, and...everyone else, they’re all the same. I was always able to do everything I attempted, and they *hated* it, so I had to just act like the smiling, kind version of myself, and hide everything else I was feeling. Shannon, she’s the only one...the only one that...”

I sighed, deciding to just let it go. It was a family problem—a *Miranda* problem, and so it was one I could never understand.

In front of me, Miranda swayed on her feet. It looked like even standing must be painful for her. Still, I wasn’t foolish enough to shift any closer yet—her knife was still drawn, its blade glimmering and ready in her hand.

Somehow I really doubt she’s going to come out on top, now that we’ve gotten to this point, I thought wearily. *It’s time for the fighting to be over.*

Meanwhile, Miranda was still muttering softly to herself. “Shannon...she’s honest, and kind... She said I was amazing, that I...that I was a sister she could be proud of. That’s why... That’s why I have to make everyone pay for all the times she’s been hurt... I’ve got to protect her...”

“Is that what you’re trying to do right now? Protect her?”

Shannon nodded. “It...it has to be me. I have to be the one to do it.” Her eyes were unfocused, and even she didn’t seem to understand what it was she was saying.

I could hear the sixth head sobbing from within the Jewel, overcome at Miranda’s loyalty. “She really *is* Milleia’s descendant!” he cried, sniffing noisily. “I knew it! I believed in her!”

“Yeah, okay,” the third head cut in. “The problem is, she also seriously tried to kill Lyle. So...what do you intend to do with her?”

I crossed the few feet that stretched between me and Miranda’s quivering form, then wrapped my arms around her. I let her body weight rest on me, holding her up as I hugged her. She tried to resist, but it seemed her body no longer moved properly; she didn’t even come close to shaking me off.

“From now on, I’ll protect Shannon,” I swore. “I’ll protect both of you.”

“Ha...ha ha...” Miranda’s knife fell from her hand as she laughed, her voice weak and powerless. She was crying. “And why’s that? Why would you do that?”



Well, I thought, for one thing, the fifth head said I needed to keep you guys close by, so we might as well work together from now on.

Still, that wasn't something I could tell Miranda. Instead, I said simply, "I have my reasons. And I just can't leave you two be."

They were too dangerous a pair to leave to their own devices.

"You really are...the absolute *worst*," Miranda moaned. "Didn't I *just* try to kill you?"

Strangely enough, that was exactly why I couldn't leave her. If I abandoned her and Shannon now, the fifth and sixth heads would be unbearably sad. But how could I explain that to her? I abruptly felt deeply pathetic. I had no idea what to say at times like these, and my ancestors didn't seem like they were going to offer me any advice either.

In the end, I just said, "This all started because of my careless actions. So this is me taking responsibility."

Miranda's arms lifted, her muscles shivering with fatigue as she returned my embrace. "I can't believe you're still willing to say that after seeing my true nature," she said softly. "You really are an interesting man."

"You think so?"

She snorted. "I'm a pain to deal with, you know. I'm a very, very difficult woman."

I shrugged. "I don't mind," I told her.

I meant it too—whether she was a pain or not didn't matter to me. If we were going to add comrades to our team, Miranda was the most reliable person I knew, difficult or not.

"So you're...you're really going to take responsibility, right?"

I nodded. "Of course."

From now on, it was my responsibility to protect her and Shannon. To be honest, as an adventurer and party leader both, that had already been my responsibility.

Wait... Now that I think about it, if I'm going to protect them, that means they'll have to tag along with me, I realized. I didn't even ask for their opinions on the matter.

I cleared my throat. "That is, if you want to stay by my side..."

"You really mean that, right?" Miranda murmured. "If you do, I'll stay with you forever." Miranda's body sagged, collapsing against me. "Now, finally...it's over..."

Relief hit me hard, as all of the problems that had cropped up suddenly seemed to resolve themselves at once. I was still basking in the limelight when the sixth head boomed, his voice overflowing with tears, "Lyle, you little...! You're really ready and willing to go that far? I'm so happy for you!"

Please, don't be so loud... I moaned internally. *I don't have enough mana left for this...*

"I'm proud of you, Lyle," the fifth head told me. "You really can't leave her be, so ultimately, you made the best decision you could. Still...this is going to be a heavy burden on you."

Personally, I felt like I was already carrying quite a heavy burden, but that didn't seem to be what the fifth head was talking about.

"In any case," the fourth said sternly, "Novem is still your number one. Don't forget that. Good grief, when you said you were going to take responsibility, I was so surprised I couldn't even find my voice."

Huh...? This is...odd. Why're they acting so weird?

"What are you guys talking about?" I demanded, my brow furrowing. "I just plan to welcome her as a comrade, so—"

A collective moan poured out of the Jewel. The mood suddenly completely changed, and I could feel the fifth and sixth heads' soaring opinions of me take a sudden nosedive.

"Lyle will always be Lyle, I guess," the fifth head said with a sigh.

"My thoughts exactly," the sixth head agreed. "What a complete waste of time. But...the real question is how do we handle this? Miranda definitely

thinks...”

The second head cleared his throat, stepping forward to clear up the confusion. “In short, Lyle, Miranda took your declaration of taking responsibility for her to mean that you were taking her on as your woman. It sounded shockingly like a confession of love.”

The third head started cackling. “You’re really something Lyle,” he said. “Just when I thought you’d developed some backbone... I mean, don’t get me wrong, I had my doubts—you just had me going there for a minute.” He let out a long, gusty sigh. “That’s my Lyle. You never betray our expectations.”

The fourth was angry. Livid, even. “This is no laughing matter,” he roared. “If you tell a woman you’re taking responsibility, that’s what it means!”

“Lyle, if this is how far Miranda will go because of a false confession, just think about what she’d do if you told her all this was a misunderstanding,” the seventh head said, his voice tired. “I say you just leave well enough alone—you achieved the final result you were after anyway. And, despite her status as a court noble, she *is* the daughter of a viscount. She has just barely enough status to match with you.”

No, forget status! I’m just a normal adventurer! I thought indignantly. *She’s the one who’s out of my league. Seventh— Grandpa, what exactly are you thinking?*

“Let’s just put the whole matter aside for the time being,” the fourth head said with a sigh. “Thankfully, we won’t have to crush a young girl’s eyes for the time being. So, all’s well that ends well.”

Personally, I didn’t see how anything was resolved, but I was at a bit of a loss as to how I could change that.

“W-Wait a second,” I stammered. “I mean, I want to keep her around as a comrade, but when I said it was my responsibility, I meant it was the party leader’s responsibility to protect their members, and—”

“Just give it up,” the second head plainly stated. “This wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t tell her you were going to take responsibility for her.”

How was I supposed to know that?! Everyone keeps talking about

responsibility this, responsibility that... If I knew, I would have chosen my words more carefully!

And with that thought, an immense pain raced through my body. I could feel the strength draining from every fiber of my being.

“N-No, it can’t be...” I said, panicked. “Why *now*?”

“Oh, are you having your second one, perhaps?” the third head asked. His voice was positively overflowing with excitement.

Chapter 53: The Automaton

As Miranda boarded the floor-transfer device on the twenty-fifth floor, she reached up and wiped a layer of sweat from her brow. Looking around her, she could only sigh at the horrible situation that met her eyes.

“I never thought we’d go through Growth as a group...”

Lyle had been the first one to show the signs; he’d keeled over due to an intense wave of fatigue. He was still wrapped tightly in a blanket, and currently lay unmoving on the floor.

“I want to go home...” he moaned disconsolately.

“There’s just a little more to go, milord,” Novem said gently. “Let’s stick it out together.”

If only everyone else had such devoted caretakers, Miranda thought, staring at the two other members of their party that had collapsed. They were practically no better off than Lyle was.

Professor Damian was lying limp in Sophia’s hold, his eyes rolled back and drool leaking from his lips. Despite his refusal to wake from his deep slumber, his grip on the massive Demonic Stone he’d pulled from the box spider had not slackened an inch.

Miranda could tell it was all Sophia could do to haul the professor and his dolls around—she seemed to be barely hanging on. This was compounded by the fact that she herself was showing pre-Growth ills.

“Sophia,” Novem called over to the other girl, “are you doing all right? We’re almost there. Let’s get through this last stretch together.”

“I-I’m having a pretty hard time, but...I can manage,” Sophia mumbled in return.

Clara seemed to take this as her cue to give one of their other members a pep talk. She turned to Aria and said, “Give it one last push, Aria. We’ll be

aboveground in no time.”

“I... I get that, but everything hurts like hell...”

There might be some disparities in their conditions, Miranda thought, but this is still quite bizarre. Four people entering Growth at the same time is practically unheard of.

She looked back over at Lyle, only to hear him moan, “I can’t do this anymore... I just want to become the floor...”

He seems to be the type who experiences extreme symptoms when he enters a Growth, Miranda mused, wincing at the seemingly endless string of words, wrung through with hopelessness, that were coming out of Lyle’s mouth. Some were practically incomprehensible. And the weakness he experiences isn’t just physical; it’s mental as well, it seems.

Miranda walked over to Lyle and stooped down to his level. “You know, having Growths this extreme is very rare, Lyle.”

When he didn’t respond, Miranda poked at his cheek, but got absolutely no reaction. From what she could tell, it was a struggle for Lyle to move his body at all—the only reason they’d been able to get him all the way to the floor-transfer device was because she and Novem had been taking turns carrying him. That said, he’d still managed to point them in the right direction, even given his condition.

“We should probably contact the Academy when we get to the surface,” Clara said with a sigh. “They’ll take Professor Damian off our hands. I’ll go to the Guild and make our report. What inn are you guys staying at?”

Hearing that, Miranda raised her hand. “My house will be closer, and I’ve got rooms to spare. Let’s just carry them there.”

Novem started, a troubled look coming over her face. “But if we do that...”

Miranda smiled back at her. “Oh, don’t worry about it. In fact, from here on out, you can just stay at my place. Those inn fees are just going to keep adding up, right?”

Novem hung her head. “Once everyone’s calmed down, we can discuss the

matter. For now, we'll take you up on your generosity."

Miranda beamed. "You heard her, Lyle. You can take it easy at my place...and then you're going to take responsibility, if it's the *last thing I do*."

Lyle, however, didn't hear a word she said. He lay limp beneath his blanket, fast asleep.

When Shannon was rolled through the front door of her home, having been retrieved from the hospital, she was immediately met with an outrageous sight.

A girl with waist-length red hair was dressed in her eldest sister's clothing, crooning happily to a little sparrow that was perched on one of their windowsills.

"My, how lovely! To think the birds would begin talking to me," the girl said with a happy smile, reaching a hand out to the tiny bird. "Oh, I can't believe I didn't recognize that this world was so beautiful..."

Shannon had to flush, looking at how the excess material of her sister's dress sagged over the girl's chest. *Why is this strange girl dressed up in my sister's clothing?* she thought. *And, not to mention...*

Shannon glanced down, only to find a second girl sprawled out on their couch. She had long, silky black hair, and was munching down on a pile of sweets. In contrast to the red-headed girl, this one was barely clothed, in just her undergarments and a shirt. And, Shannon couldn't help but notice, the shirt looked...quite restrained...around the girl's chest area.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the black-haired girl mumbled. "Can you forget about those stupid birds already, Aria? Go make yourself useful and buy me some snacks, why don'tcha?"

And who is this girl?! And why is she just making herself at home in my house?!?!?

It was like while Shannon had been gone, her home had been infested with strange women.

"S-Sis? What's going on here?"

Miranda sighed. “You’re shocked, I can see. I understand where you’re coming from. I never expected Aria to ask me for a dress, to be honest, and Sophia...well, she just started in on all the snacks I’d been saving up without a word.”

Lifting her torso just barely off the sofa cushions, Sophia shamelessly nodded and said, “I sure did! They’re delicious.”

“N-Now look here!” Shannon cried out. Her eyes locked onto an empty sack of sweet treats on the floor. “Why are you digging into *my* sweets?! Those were my favorite!”

“Were they, now?” Sophia burst into laughter. “Well, after all I’ve eaten, I can hardly remember which flavor they were.”

“Shut up!” Shannon cried out, having forgotten to play the part of a frail little girl. “Don’t say another word!”

This show of anger was interrupted when Shannon felt Miranda place a hand in the center of her back, then gently urge her to stand up.

“S-Sis?!” Shannon stuttered, deeply confused.

“Shannon...” Miranda said in a gentle tone. “I’m a bit surprised you could tell that Sophia ate your favorite sweet.”

Shannon froze. Her sister’s voice may be kind, but her aura certainly wasn’t. The mana wafting around Miranda quivered with rage.

“W-Well, I just... Th-There was all th-this context, like the s-smell and— Ow! Dat ’urts, shish!”

Her gentle smile still on her face, Miranda cruelly pulled at both of Shannon’s cheeks. “I knew about those eyes of yours from the beginning, Shannon. Now, get out of the wheelchair—this is the last day you’ll spend in it. From here on out, you’re going to have to do your share of work. No more special treatment. Do you understand?”

Shannon’s cheeks ached, and her eyes were teary as she replied, “A-Aye undahschtand! A’ll ne’er do eet aghen!”

Miranda released her, then pulled her into an embrace, which only left

Shannon feeling even more confused. Then, her older sister stepped away and informed her, “This house is going to get rowdy from now on. Why don’t we get you put to work right away?”

“Huh?!” Shannon said, pressing her hands to her aching cheeks. She looked absolutely dumbfounded. “Wait, those girls...they’re *them*! Don’t tell me you plan on letting them live here?!”

“That’s right,” Miranda confirmed cheerfully. “They’ll be staying with us, along with Lyle and Novem.” Miranda’s gaze abruptly narrowed. “Wait—where *are* Lyle and Novem?”

Sophia had vanished into the kitchen, so Miranda directed the question toward Aria. The other girl started spinning round and round, dancing around the room, and then finally said, “Umm... Oh! Lyle said he was going to the Professor’s place.”

Miranda immediately began to panic. “You let him go out in that state?!”

Aria’s spinning stopped, and she struck a dashing pose. “Yeah! He said, ‘Fate is calling me,’ and ran out! That’s so my Lyle! What a wonderful gentleman he is, for fate to personally summon him!”

Miranda sighed, pretending she hadn’t heard the rest of what Aria said. “This is trouble... I should head out for a bit of shopping, then. Shannon, watch the house for me. Don’t let those two out, no matter what.”

Shannon looked over her two charges. Aria was still dancing a strange waltz, and Sophia had just returned from the kitchen, a loaf of bread in hand. The black-haired girl immediately plopped down on their sofa and began eating.

How am I supposed to look after these people?!

Miranda headed out once again, abandoning Shannon to her troublesome new duties.

“Milord, how about we just *don’t* do this? You could do it any other day, so let’s just return to Miranda’s house and rest up!”

I gave Novem a fond look over my shoulder as I strode down the halls of the

Academy. The adorable little lady was clinging to me, as if she couldn't bear to let go.

It's not as if I'm here to do anything particularly tiring! I thought with a shrug. *I'm just here to see Professor Damian.*

"My dear Novem, I think I've rested plenty. I've spent two whole days at Miranda's house already!" I went to peer into her eyes, but, though the movement was slight, she averted them—almost as if she was hiding something! I gasped. "Wait, don't tell me...is it because you want to monopolize me?! I knew it!"

After a moment of stunned silence, Novem furiously nodded my way. "Err, th-that's right! So, let's go home, milord! Let's come here some other day!"

I felt bad, but unfortunately, I had to reject her. "I dearly wish I could make that wish come true, since it's a request from you. But...there's just one problem, Novem, my love. Once I've decided I'm going to do something, that action becomes fate! I cannot stop what has already begun. I'm sorry, and I hope you can understand."

The ancestors were cackling in the Jewel. All six of them had burst into laughter.

"How is he so optimistic?" demanded the second head.

The third head snorted. "I wish normal Lyle would take a page out of this guy's book."

The fourth head let loose another wave of laughter, his voice coming in gasps. "Wait, my stomach... I...I've laughed so much it hurts!"

"You want to monopolize me?" the fifth head quoted. "That might be his best line yet today."

"Oh, no, just wait," the sixth head boomed, his voice rough with amusement. "There may be even more to come."

"Personally," the seventh head said, "I like that part about fate. But what I really can't wait to see is how Lyle will be once he's back to normal."

I grinned to myself. *When my ancestors are happy, I'm happy! I wish a*

splendid day upon you too, my good people!

“Milord,” Novem said desperately, “please listen to me. This has nothing to do with fate or anything like that! You must return to Miranda’s for your own sake—holing up for even a few more days will do wonders for you!”

She seems so anxious, I thought, looking down at Novem, who was still clinging to me determinedly. *Here, this should help.*

I leaned forward, casually sweeping her off her feet and into my arms in a so-called princess cradle.

Her face suddenly turned red. “L-Lord Lyle! I-In public, this is—”

“A moment, please,” I said, cutting her off. “Oh, yes, this is the professor’s lab, I remember.”

As I stood before the large door, Novem began to kick her legs. “*Wait.* Milord, I’m begging you, please wait!”

I looked down at her and grinned. “What a feisty princess I seem to have here! I beg of you, please make do with this for now.”

I clutched her tight and threw the door open, cutting short any more complaints Novem might have. Then, with the way now open before me, I strutted inside Professor Damian’s domain, which was filled with quite a splendid array of different devices. I noticed that he’d placed his precious Demonic Stone within a transparent dome.

“Pardon me,” I called. “Is the professor in?”

A crowd of men and women dressed in lab coats directed their eyes at me. Some appeared shocked, while others stared at me with eyes dripping with envy. Otherwise, most of them just looked weary.

Seeing how many people were looking at us, Novem buried her face in her hands and turned red to the tips of her ears.

Hearing my voice, Professor Damian looked up from what he was doing, which appeared to be connecting a device of sorts to the coffin we’d...well, a coffin *similar* to the one we’d obtained, and stared at Novem and I with bloodshot eyes.

“Oh, Lyle!” he said cheerfully, stopping his fiddling with the strange device. “You came at just the right time!”

I lowered Novem to the ground, since it seemed that she’d finally calmed down, and then made my way over to Professor Damian. Once I got close enough, I gave him a high five.

Meanwhile, all the people in lab coats were making quite a ruckus. I heard one of them shout, “The professor just said someone’s name!” but I wasn’t interested in what they were getting so rowdy about. It was of little consequence to me, so I ignored it, focusing on the professor instead.

“Please, professor, I, Lyle Walt, am a man who never misses his moment!” I declared. “Now, it looks like you haven’t gotten it up and running yet.”

Damian nodded and tapped his knuckle against the coffin. “I was just about to activate it, my man.”

“Then I should get my automaton out too.”

With a snap of my fingers, I activated Box. The magic circle appeared, and I directed my coffin to float its way out, then settle on the floor. Its construction was quite similar to the one Professor Damian was working on, I noticed, although there were some subtle differences in design choice.

“Milord!” Novem screamed at me. “Does it *really* have to be today? You might be hindering the professor.”

I looked at Professor Damian, and he shook his head. “We’ve secured the necessary energy to activate it, so it shouldn’t be a problem. In fact, we can only run the activation command once, so once everything was prepared, I had planned to call you over anyway. After all, I’m curious to see what sort of automaton you have too.”

To think Professor Damian was waiting for me this entire time! I thought, my heart filling with warmth. I watched in fascination as the man began to insert colored cords into holes on my coffin, like he’d practiced doing it a hundred times before.

“You heard the man,” I told Novem. “Don’t worry. If it goes on a rampage and attacks, I’ll protect you.”

“Th-That’s not what I...” she trailed off, almost like she was giving up.

Behind me, I could feel the eyes of the crowd growing more envious by the second. They didn’t bother me one bit, though—I just ignored them entirely.

Meanwhile, Professor Damian’s preparations were coming to an end. He flipped a switch, then nodded to himself. “Yes, that should just about do it.”

Suddenly, Professor Damian’s Demonic Stone filled the room with a powerful red light. Then, slowly, the Stone melted away, until the dome that covered it was left completely empty. Once the light had died down, the lids of both coffins slowly opened up, and I could hear the sound of air gushing out of them.

And both coffins revealed... *Why, they practically look like princesses asleep on their beds!*

Professor Damian’s automaton had been built in the shape of a young girl, and had long black hair. Her navy clothes were accented with white lace at the sleeves and collar, but what stood out most was the apron she was wearing, which had been decorated with frills like it was a fancy dress.

Coincidentally, it seemed my automaton was wearing the exact same apron.

“These are automatons?” I asked the professor, leaning forward curiously. “They almost look like they’re alive.”

My automaton had pale skin and golden hair that was so long that even though it had been tied up into pigtails, it still reached her hips. The tips of these tails curled up at the very ends, but overall, her hair was straight and voluminous. Just like Professor Damian’s automaton, mine had white lace around her collar and sleeves and had frills at the hem of her long skirt, but instead of navy, mine’s dress was a vivid red. Her white apron wrapped around her shoulders and abdomen, extending over the shapely protrusion of her chest, and ending just short of the end of her skirt.

“Why is she wearing a dress and apron, anyways?” I asked thoughtfully.

“Apparently, the ancients regarded this as the standard attire for servants and attendants,” Professor Damian told me, flipping through a handwritten memo pad as he answered. “There do seem to be a few variations in the patterns, though.”

I see, I thought, nodding seriously. If it's an ancient custom, I'll have to accept it.

"That's fine then," I told the professor. "So...how do we wake her up?"

Professor Damian handed me a needle. "Apparently, you have to offer blood as a catalyst for the contract. You'll need to insert a drop of blood into their mouth, or you can stick a bleeding finger in too, apparently."

Blood for a contract? I wondered. That's...how should I put it... In stories, those folks you make blood contracts with are never decent people. Not to mention...

I looked at the sleeping girl. "Professor Damian... That simply won't do."

"Huh? You really think it won't? I properly disinfected that needle, you know, but you can always use your own knife if you prefer."

No, that's not it, I thought, feeling a bit appalled with him. Why hasn't he noticed?

"Professor Damian, the method to wake a sleeping princess has been passed down for centuries, has it not? It's a kiss, good sir! Why, blood is simply uncouth."

The professor gave me a dubious look. "No, no, we're making a contract here! What's a kiss going to do with it?"

Ignoring him, I spread out my arms and declared, "For me, Lyle Walt, nothing is impossible! For you see, I am a man chosen by fate itself! I may not be a prince, but I'm better! In fact, you could say I'm more valuable than any prince, for you'll never find another man like me!"

I met Novem's worried gaze with a smile and approached my automaton. "Now, my sleeping princess..." I murmured. "It's time for your morning kiss."

In the Jewel, the third head broke out into laughter. "There he goes! It's no good—I'm at my limit! My stomach hurts!"

And, just like that, I leaned forward and kissed the sleeping automaton. It was fine at first, but then I felt its tongue enter my mouth!

This girl! She just turned my first kiss into a French kiss! Ha ha, like hell I'm

going to be beat!

Filled with fighting spirit, I stuck my tongue into the automaton's mouth as well. Her eyes slowly opened, and the red irises that gazed at me from between her lashes were a true beauty to behold. I felt as if I would be sucked right into them.

The automaton retracted her tongue, and so, I slowly parted from her. "Now how are you feeling, princess?" I asked courteously. "My name is Lyle Walt...but you can call me Prince Charming."

Professor Damian seemed incredibly excited by my actions. He instructed a nearby assistant to begin recording at once as he showered me praise. "That was amazing, unbelievable even! Lyle, I never thought you could activate an automaton like that! This is an incredible discovery!"

As Professor Damian ranted, my automaton slowly sat up. She looked around and opened her mouth, words pouring from her lips, almost like a spell. "Initiating data link...unable to connect. Retrying... Retrying... Failure. System switching to independent operation. Network not found... Initiating contact with sibling units...no response. Missing crucial system files. Repair impossible. Illegal access detected. Confirming body interference. Initiating automatic checks..."

All eyes in the room gathered on her, fascinated. I didn't mind—she might have been standing out more than me, but she was still *my* automaton. It was all the same in the end.

A short amount of time passed, in which my automaton continued to mutter. Finally, though, she stood from the bed and turned toward me, pinching the hem of her skirt between her fingers and lifting it even as she lowered her head. It was an elegant movement, one that had been refined to utter perfection.

"Thank you for activating Automaton Type... Oh? This is strange. I cannot recall my individual identification number."

I watched her, enthralled. Her humanlike movements were completely different from the automaton I had pictured—I'd been imagining something closer to the dolls Damian piloted. Something that made it clearer that she was a machine. The way she was, anyone in their right mind would have mistaken

her as a human.

“Are you okay?” I asked, worried.

The automaton smiled at me. “Yes, of course. I am perfectly all right. Why wouldn’t I be, having been awoken by a pervert who kisses an automaton to initiate them? It seems that certain data files of mine have been corrupted, but beyond that I am perfectly fine. Is that not obvious just by looking at me?”

“That’s quite an attitude to take with one’s master,” the fourth head said, seeming a bit weirded out. “Is that just how the ancients communicated with one another? And are we *sure* she’s an automaton, and not some human that was lying dormant?”

His words made me curious, and I tried investigating her with my Arts. *Huh. She really does have a different internal structure than a human.*

“What, are you not happy with me?” I asked absently. “By the way, that was my first kiss.”

The automaton pressed her hands to her lips, her expression turning shocked. “Oh, my word! So my master is indeed a man who would offer his first kiss to a sleeping woman—I’m so happy that I want to *cry*. Although you have been recorded as ‘master’ in my databanks, in honor of that fact that you’re so spineless that you only kiss ladies who are unresponsive, I simply must refer to you as, ‘damn chicken.’”

“Is this thing broken?” the second head stammered. “Shouldn’t her reaction be completely the opposite?”

I brushed my bangs aside and pointed my thumb at my chest. “You can call me whatever you want,” I told her. “But remember this...that chicken will one day soar through the open skies.”

“Milord, chickens can’t fly far,” Novem corrected me. “And by chicken, she meant you were a coward...”

“Oh, I know,” I said, nodding vigorously. “But it is a problem of mindset, dear Novem! For if I was a chicken, I’d be flapping my wings in the deep-blue sky right about now! I’d be flying like no other chicken could! They wouldn’t dare call me a coward!”

“Flying...has nothing to do with cowardice.”

I turned to Novem and struck a pose. I could feel all eyes gathering on me—how splendid it was to be the center of attention!

Yes, the world should know of my resplendent existence! But...

The automaton, who had been fidgeting, suddenly focused on me, her red eyes turning serious as Novem entered her line of sight. “You’re...” she growled, trailing off as her hand darted under her apron, pulling out a hammer so large I had to wonder where she’d hidden it.

That thing’s way too big for a woman of her slender build to swing about, I thought idly as she held it up with both hands.

“I’ve got you now!” the automaton shouted. She kicked off the ground and was about to lower her raised hammer onto Novem’s head, and then...

I sighed. “You fool.”

I calmly moved forward, stepping between the two girls, and smacked the automaton on the head.

“Ow!” she cried, her eyes narrowing in reproach. “Why must you get in my way?! Damn chicken, please give me permission to engage at once!” She set the hammer down with teary eyes, holding her head as she protested.

“Novem is my beloved,” I told the automaton firmly. “She’s important to me. Do you understand? Now apologize.”

Novem sent me a questioning look and shook her head. “If you showed just a tenth of this optimism in your normal state...”

The automaton returned her hammer from whence it came, then reluctantly turned to Novem to apologize. “The moment I saw you, I felt an intense hatred well up from within my very core, but since that chicken insists, I graciously apologize! There, now accept my apology.”

I sighed. “Why are you being so condescending?”

Novem just pressed a hand to her brow and nodded. “I’ll be...more careful next time.”

Having watched—and recorded—everything that had happened, Professor Damian now loudly proclaimed, “All right, my turn next! Oh, this is so truly intriguing. The words she mutters are interesting too—I’ll have to look into them.” He turned to face his automaton. “Now then, let’s get started. My first kiss is saved for my ideal woman, so I’ll be using blood on this one.”

He pricked his finger and inserted it into the automaton’s mouth.

“Ah, yes, I can feel its tongue wrapping around me,” the professor said, amused. “And...is that saliva I feel? Were the ancients perfectionists or something?”

All of a sudden, the black-haired automaton sat up and raised her eyelids to reveal the red irises beneath. “Initiating data link...unable to connect. Active automaton detected. Requesting information.”

Something seemed to be different—this one’s mumbling stopped as her eyes turned toward my automaton. My automaton’s red eyes flickered rapidly. So, too, did the eyes on Professor Damian’s model. They were locked in a stare for some time before Professor Damian’s automaton finally stood.

“I see,” she said. “I now understand that there is a complete lack of understanding of the current predicament. However, master registration has been completed. My master is...”

Professor Damian popped forward. “Oh, that’s me. Actually, there are a few things I want to ask—”

“Please, hold that thought, master,” the black-haired automaton said, cutting him off. The automaton stared at Professor Damian, then quivered and covered her mouth.

“Huh? But why?”

“Is this how they normally react?” I heard the seventh say. “Seems Lyle pulled the short straw.”

I shrugged. *A bit of crazy does me just fine. I don’t think it’ll be an issue.*

“M-Master,” the black-haired automaton finally said, “when was the last time you washed your clothes?”

Professor Damian looked down at what he was wearing. There were stains on his clothes, left from some spilled project or another, alongside some terrible frays and tatters. His lab coat was filthy as well.

“I can’t remember,” he admitted.

“*Nooooo!*” the automaton shrieked.

Everyone took a step back, on guard for what was to come. I was the only one who stepped forward instead. Why, you ask? Because you must strive to be different! Novem and my automaton didn’t seem to approve of my actions, however. They were both giving me frosty looks.

“Oh, to have a master dressed like such a mess!” the black-haired automaton continued to wail. She turned to my automaton. “And what’s more, *that* appearance...I take it you are one of those scrap heaps who brags about being a custom model?!”

My model...a scrap heap? I wondered, looking over at my automaton. She was bending back a bit to puff out her chest.

“Indeed,” she began to brag, placing one hand on her hefty bosom, “I am a custom model. My worth is far higher than that mass-produced *garbage* over there. I’m also many times as expensive! I can perform at twice the level she can! That’s why I can’t take that insult you just gave me lying down—if you’ll let me have my say, *you* are the inferior product!”

In a complete mood change from her previous dismay, Professor Damian’s automaton shook her head, eyes full of disdain. “I feel absolutely no envy when a model who regards her master as a ‘damn chicken’ brags about her worth to me. However...this is terrible. This room is terrible too. I shall take it as a challenge, to exhibit my abilities at once!”

The black-haired automaton stepped behind Professor Damian, then began shoving him forward from behind. “Now then, let’s head to the bath first, master.”

“No, I’d like to start by asking some—”

Ignoring his resistance, the automaton shoved him straight out of the room. For a brief instant, her face flashed with what I could have sworn was ecstasy. I

thought I saw her wipe away a string of drool as well.

“Hey! I still have research to do!” I heard Professor Damian cry from the hall.

“This will all be over soon,” his automaton crooned. “You’ll be researching again before you know it! Now, lead me to the bathing area! I promise I’m not going to do anything!”

Even from a distance, Professor Damian’s voice sounded puzzled. “What do you mean you’re not going to do anything...? Oh! Is this perhaps a custom of the ancients? Then perhaps I should experience... No, but I still have my research to...”

“Oh, good, so you *are* interested! Just leave it to me, then. There is nothing a first-rate maid is not capable of. I am loaded with a wide array of options—I’m sure you will be satisfied! Master, you need only count the stains on the ceiling; there is nothing to worry about!”

“He’s about to get devoured...” the sixth head muttered.

Why do I...feel like Professor Damian is in danger, for some reason...? I wondered.

Still, there was nothing I could do now—the professor was gone. And, now that my automaton had been activated, I’d accomplished what I’d come here for.

I turned to Novem and the automaton. “All right,” I said, “we should be off too. Everyone’s waiting for us back at the house.”

“Yes, let’s go...” Novem replied with a weary face. She let out a long sigh. “I wonder if Aria and Sophia are doing okay...”

The automaton grabbed both my hands with glee. “So we’re going to my workplace?” she demanded. “Leave it all to me! I promise to provide you with an optimal living environment from dawn till dusk!”

The automaton walked beside me down the Academy hall, a skip in her step.

What a pleasant comrade I’ve found myself! I thought with a grin.

Chapter 54: Monster

Once Novem returned from the Academy, she began doing laundry at the Circry sisters' home. With five—no, six now—occupants, there was naturally a great many clothes that needed washing.

The ruckus at the Academy had happened only that morning, and when Novem had returned to the house, she'd found Aria keeled over, sick from spinning too much, and Sophia nearly naked, keen on taking a snack run. Novem had barely managed to stop her...

"Now, let's set these out to dry," Novem said to herself, heading for the home's fenced-in yard.

It was a bit late in the day to hang clothes out to dry, but they were still in the sweltering days of summer, when water evaporated the fastest.

It should be fine, Novem decided, and from there proceeded to hang up garment after garment.

The yard where she worked looked as if it had been constructed with the wealthy in mind, as it was considerably vast. It was not hard to tell that the Circry home was the sort of property that only the cream of the crop—be they merchants or nobles—could afford to their children. Even the home's construction seemed to have been done under the premise that whoever owned it in the future would have servants on hand to tend to it.

It must have been difficult for Miranda to do all the housework alone, Novem thought.

To that point, there were a few very conspicuous parts of the property that had clearly fallen by the wayside, as if the other girl simply hadn't had the time to get around to caring for them. One of these was the lawn, which had grown rather high.

After she finished hanging up the laundry, Novem took a moment to look out across the overgrown expanse, then nodded to herself. "There's no time now,

and I doubt there will be after this. So, for now...”

Novem snapped her fingers.

The hanging laundry flapped in a sudden gust of wind, and the tall grass of the lawn was shaved cleanly short by the breeze. Though no one touched it, the reaped grass floated in the air and piled itself up in one spot.

“I really shouldn’t be doing this, but...” Novem trailed off, turning to leave with her laundry basket in hand.

She took a step forward, only to run into a young girl who was standing in the doorway. All it took was one look at her for Novem to roughly surmise who she was.

Shannon, was it? But those eyes...!

The girl stared at her, her yellow pupils having gone nearly gold. A strange, bewitching glow emanated from them which put Novem immediately on her guard. Still, she plastered a smile on her face.

“Good day,” Novem called out to the young girl. “Are you Shannon, perchance?”

Novem hadn’t gotten a chance to meet the girl yet, as when she’d returned home only Aria and Sophia had been in the main room. Which, it should be mentioned, had been turned entirely upside down. As Aria had informed her of Miranda’s departure—the other girl had apparently gone out shopping—Lyle had disappeared with the automaton and gotten to work cleaning the house up. He seemed to be still working away, as while Novem had worked in the yard, she’d periodically heard bursts of his overblown laughter.

All that to say, if Novem was going to meet an unfamiliar girl in the Circry home, it would have to be Shannon. She even recalled Miranda saying she’d gone to fetch the girl earlier that morning.

Novem continued to smile at the quiet younger girl, but she remained silent, her face completely absent of emotion. Still, Novem felt like she could sense fear brewing under the surface.

“What did you just do?” Shannon demanded suddenly.

“I did the laundry,” Novem said simply. “You know, now that there are more people here, there’s a lot of work to do—”

“Not that!” Shannon shouted. Her face blanched, and her ankles began to quake with terror. “I was *asking* about that magic you just used! Mana never moves that cleanly! You...you got each and every one of those small beads of mana to move in perfect unison! What even are you?!”

Novem narrowed her eyes. *So she can see mana, hmm? Only one person of House Walt ever inherited mana-seeing eyes—Lady Milleia. I see now. This girl’s the reason that Lord Lyle took action.*

With her laundry basket in hand, Novem stepped closer to Shannon, coming up on the doorway to the house. Shannon tried to flee back inside, but Novem swiftly grabbed her by the arm before she could escape.

“Where are you going?” Novem asked mildly.

“L-Let go of me!” Shannon shouted, her eyes flashing gold. “I-I won’t let you —!”

Novem cocked her head, analyzing the feeble power she could feel radiating from the girl, which seemed to be trying to encroach upon her body. Unfortunately for Shannon, such a weak level of interference would do nothing to her.

It does appear she has the same eyes as Lady Milleia. Though it doesn’t seem she has managed to draw out any of their abilities.

After much writhing, Shannon managed to escape the firm grip of Novem’s hand. She pushed past Novem and ran into the yard. It appeared the younger girl was trying to escape onto the Aramthurst’s streets, presumably to find Miranda. But Novem managed to get ahead of her.

“You’re quite slow,” Novem observed, blocking the girl’s path of escape. “You don’t usually walk on your own two feet, do you?”

Ah, yes, I recall Miranda mentioning that Shannon was blind, and used a wheelchair. She must be quite lacking in terms of exercise.

Cornering the younger girl against the fence, Novem reached a hand out and

touched her brow.

Shannon quivered. “You—you’re not human! You’re abnormal! A normal person’s mana sways and shakes...but yours is completely still! A monster... You’re a *monster!*”

Novem smiled, but not because she harbored any positive emotions toward Shannon. The younger girl’s body twitched, her eyes filling with even more fear than before.

I must look like a real monster to her now, Novem thought idly.

“It is not strange for my mana to move as it does,” she told Shannon in a cold, flat tone. “After all, I am hardly ever moved by emotions. But it’s my turn to ask questions now. When did you obtain those eyes?”

Shannon stared back at Novem, struck into terrified, immobile silence.

Once it became clear the girl wasn’t going to speak, Novem went on, “Those eyes are incredibly dangerous, you know. I can see why milord is so interested in you now. It’s no wonder. You and your sister are very interesting indeed.”

But even as she said the words, Novem couldn’t help but wonder, *Was it Miranda milord was wary of, then? Or...was all of this a complete coincidence? Anything else would imply that he knew about Shannon’s eyes, but that’s impossible.*

Novem decided to put Lyle’s portion of the matter on hold, at least for the time being. It was more important to focus on the task set out before her. After all, Shannon’s eyes were incredibly dangerous.

“I heard you were treated very poorly by House Circry,” Novem said consideringly. “Do you intend to enact revenge against them?”

“Th-That’s—”

“Answer honestly. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

To tell the truth, Novem had spoken from conjecture alone, based on what she’d heard about Shannon so far. She hadn’t been sure if the girl actually held a grudge against her family or not, but based on her strong reaction, she most likely did.

Shannon bit her lower lip and clenched her hands.

Those are the signs of a powerful anger, Novem mused. *That's very dangerous. I'll have to seal them—*

"Fine, you've got me!" Shannon cried out. "You're right—I'm going to get my revenge on everyone who mocked me and made me a laughingstock one day! Just you wait! I'll put a worm in Doris's dress, and I'll draw on father's paperwork! And then, and then... And then I'm going to have lots and *lots* of revenge, you hear me?! I'm *never* going to forgive them."

Novem's hand froze in mid-motion. Her voice grew a bit softer than it had been moments before. "And that's...your idea of revenge? That'll be enough to satisfy you?"

Shannon's eyes wandered. "U-Umm, don't be stupid, there's no way it'll end at that! A-After that, umm... I'll put loads of green peppers in their food!"

Novem cocked her head curiously. "Do you dislike green peppers?"

Shannon made a face of utter distaste. "What do you mean?! Who in their right mind likes those bitter things? Everyone in the world hates them. Nutrition? Don't make me laugh! Anyway, I'll load their plates with a whole bunch of them, and I won't forgive them until they've eaten every last bite!"

Novem released Shannon entirely, both her hands dropping back at her side. "And that's revenge, is it?" she asked softly. She thoughtfully rubbed her chin, then hung her head.

Shannon cast her eyes down and huffily averted her face. "It sure is! What's your problem, anyway? Are you saying revenge is wrong? Well, *too bad*. I'm a bad girl, so I'll do whatever I want. Big sis betrayed me...she betrayed me, so I'll..." The young girl trailed off, struggling to hold back tears.

Seeing Shannon's distress, Novem stooped down until their eyes were on the same level. "This will be our little secret," she said.

Novem reached out and lightly brushed Shannon's eyes closed, sliding her index fingers gently across both of the girl's eyelids. Even through that light touch, she could feel Shannon shaking.

“May your eyes be filled with light,” Novem muttered. Shannon’s body collapsed slowly, gently, and Novem caught her before she could hit the ground. “I doubt you’ll remember anything when you wake up, but you might be a bit confused,” she said to the unconscious girl.

The smile that came over Novem’s face then was far different from the one that had come only moments before. It was kinder, more natural. Or, at least it *was*, until Lyle came bursting out of the house.

“Noveeeeeem!!! Are you okay? Nwah—! Take that!”

Novem turned, a bemused look on her face, just in time to see Lyle race into the yard and trip on the mound of piled grass she’d carefully made just moments earlier. He tumbled over himself, landing in quite the peculiar pose, with his legs folded and his head propped up with one hand.

“What exactly are you doing, milord?” Novem asked, a long-suffering tone in her voice.

“Oh, I just happened to sense a hostile signal next to you, so I rushed to your aid,” he explained, climbing to his feet. He began patting himself clean of the grass that covered him, then continued, “That said, it seems even being covered in foliage isn’t enough to diminish my splendor. I’m starting to fear myself.”

It’s...a bit terrifying when he’s this overconfident, Novem thought.

“I-Indeed, milord. But why don’t we go ahead and get you out of those clothes, hmm?”

I have more laundry to do it seems, Novem thought with an inward sigh. She sent a troubled smile to the boy who’d rushed to her aid.

This scene was then interrupted by the automaton bursting into the yard holding a cleaning device, having perhaps left her work behind to chase after Lyle.

“Get back here, you damn chicken!” she cried. “Let us continue our game of wife and mother-in— Tsk, so this is where you were hiding, you vixen.”

The robot made a genuinely disgusted face at Novem. Confused, Novem just frowned in return.

“Game of what, exactly, milord?” Novem asked Lyle.

Lyle proudly struck a pose, blades of grass still sticking from his hair. “It is my job to take on the role of mother-in-law and nag her about how poorly she cleans!” he proclaimed. “Meanwhile, it’s her job to act all frustrated about it. But this girl does her work so perfectly, I can’t even find anything to nitpick. I’m already bored.”

The automaton crumbled to her knees upon hearing that. “You’re bored of me already? On my first day? Am I...to be retired so soon? No! Anything but that! Not when I’ve finally found a useless chicken to serve!”

Lyle ignored the automaton’s dramatics, instead looking at Shannon, whom Novem was still holding in her arms. He poked at the younger girl’s cheek.

“Is she unconscious or something?” he asked, taking her off Novem’s hands. “Well, looks like I’m fated to spend some time rescuing multiple different sleeping beauties today. I don’t want to get in your way, Novem—I’ll carry her to her bed.”

“Uh, well...” Novem began, but he was already off.

The automaton got back to her feet and followed behind him. “Oh, I must go too! Chicken, leave it to me to make the bed.”

Novem was left standing alone in the yard, staring at the hand she’d reached out in Lyle’s direction. He’d come and gone so fast that he reminded Novem of a summer storm.

“I don’t wanna!” I moaned, burying my head into my pillow. I curled up under my blanket, hiding from Novem, who was currently outside my room.

“I warned you of this back then, milord,” Novem said, her troubled voice seeping under my door. “But you refused to listen. Even when we locked you in, you went as far as escaping from the windows, so there was little I could do. Now, get out of that room.”

Aren’t you being a bit cold, Novem? I demanded internally. *How could you say such things to a man who’s in tears?!*

“You should’ve just tied me up, then,” I rebutted.

“Milord, I believe you’re aware that most restraints would be pointless against you, correct? Come on—get out of there. You need to eat something; it’s already noon.”

With how my mana pool and physical abilities had shot up due to my second Growth period, the idea that I could just discard most conventional restraints didn’t seem as if it was entirely without merit. That didn’t mean I was happy about it though!

I shook as I recalled what I’d done yesterday. *I mean, how many bad memories is it possible to create over the span of one day...?! Not to mention...*

“Personally, my favorite line would have to be, ‘By the way, that was my first kiss,’” the second head said, all seriousness. “An automaton’s pretty much a machine, a doll, right? That was pretty interesting as far as I’m concerned. Although I did feel a bit anxious. I couldn’t help but wonder, *Are you really all right with this?*”

I’d really prefer it if you weren’t so earnest about this whole thing...

“No, the best line has to be, ‘It’s time for your morning kiss,’” the third head cut in. “That one had much more impact to it. Though I have to admit, Mister Lyle sure had a handful of good lines this time around, even if it *was* all meaningless drivel.”

Mister Lyle... I thought.

The third head seemed to be speaking about my overly energetic state after a Growth like I’d been an entirely different person. What’s more, he seemed to like the guy quite a bit. I just knew I’d be teased all about it for a long time to come.

The third head really does have a nasty personality...

Meanwhile, the fourth head hummed in thought. “Was there really something that topped, ‘You can call me Prince Charming’? I can’t see the Best Lyle award going to anything else.”

All of a sudden, the conversation had morphed into a competition. A feeling

of indignation rose inside of me. *Why do these guys become so serious when it comes to meaningless stuff like this?! Can't they direct all that motivation toward something else...?*

"My vote goes to, 'I'm a man who never misses his moment...'" the fifth head said thoughtfully. "The timing was perfect, after all—it summarized the entire escapade."

Even the fifth head is taking part? I thought incredulously. The same guy who said all that horrible stuff about crushing a girl's eyes? How did he shift gears so...? Wait, that little snake!

"Fifth head, are you perhaps taking an active part in this in order to shift all of the teasing to me?"

"Shut up."

I'd evidently hit the mark. *He's the worst. That furry-creature-loving scumbag.*

"How about we settle for, 'Even being covered in foliage isn't enough to diminish my splendor'?" the sixth head posited. "I mean, the way he ran into the yard and crashed into that pile of grass was peak physical comedy."

So, you want me to take your share of the teasing too, do you, sixth head? I thought darkly. It was possible that he was just enjoying participating in the debate, but I didn't quite buy it.

"It does wonders to keep it simple," the seventh head said thoughtfully. "The chicken speech really spoke volumes all by itself. I can't accept anything else as the rightful winner."

Hey, don't you jump in too! Your grandson's in a pickle here...

"S-Seventh head..."

"Can you give me a moment, Lyle? I'm having a serious discussion."

The fourth head groaned. "We can't reach a decision, huh? Then let's whittle down the candidates. Today's going to be a long day..."

It seemed my ancestors were deeply serious about this debate—far more serious than they typically were about nearly anything else.

They're all the worst, I thought in disgust. They're most definitely bad influences on me.

"Lord Lyle," Novem called again, jolting me back to reality. "You won't have any energy if you don't eat. Plus, Aria and Sophia are refusing to leave their rooms as well. Why don't you take some initiative and lead them by example, milord?"

They've holed up in their rooms as well? But they didn't have it nearly as bad as me...

In my opinion—which I cherished, regardless of what anyone else thought—those two had had it easy. Still, before I dealt with them, I had to deal with one other person who was off their rocker as well. *But, uh, can I even count her as a person...?*

"What are you doing there?" I asked mildly.

My automaton—who was still taking the chance to disparage me and call me a chicken practically every time she opened her mouth—froze, her feet on my windowsill. She appeared to be in the middle of infiltrating my room, which was on the second floor of the Circry house.

"Huh?" she said. "Well, I just thought I'd bring you your food. It's not healthy to skip meals."

That part made sense, sure. It was the fact that she'd scaled the side of Miranda's house holding a tray laden with a full-course meal in one hand that had me distracted.

"How did you climb like that?" I demanded. "And wait, don't come in."

I can't even be alone when I'm trying to hide away from the world, thanks to her, I thought with a sigh.

With my last safe place invaded, I gave up. I reluctantly crawled out of bed and walked out of my room.

"Hey, wait!" the automaton called, still half in and half out of my window. "Don't just leave me here!"

Miranda sighed, feeling quite weary as she stared at the food she'd prepared for the others. It was nearly noon, and Lyle, Aria, and Sophia were still refusing to come out of their rooms. Shannon hadn't even woken up yet.

"The food's going to get cold if it's left like this much longer," Miranda said worriedly. "But if I bring it to them, then they'll have even less reason to leave their rooms... And to think Shannon would sleep this late—she sure is taking her time getting up. I must have worked her too hard yesterday."

When Miranda had returned from her shopping, she'd found Shannon in her bed, sound asleep. According to Lyle and his party, tending to Aria and Sophia just a day after she'd been discharged from the hospital had tired her out.

I guess it was a tall order, pushing those two onto her, Miranda thought as she headed to Shannon's room.

Miranda knocked on the door, and was surprised to hear a sound of response from the person inside. "Shannon, are you awake?" she called.

"I'm...up," Shannon replied, but her tone was clearly distraught.

Pondering over how best to calm her, Miranda pushed open the door. Shannon was sitting on her bed, staring at her own hands. She kept furling and unfurling her fingers, repeating the same action over and over.

"That attitude's a bit much, don't you think?" Miranda asked cheerfully. "Before, you used to call back to me, 'I'm awake, sis!' It was so cute."

Shannon immediately picked up a pillow and tossed it at Miranda, who easily caught it with one hand.

Ah, she's furious, Miranda realized, tucking the pillow under one of her arms.

Just as Miranda had thought, Shannon was in a bad mood. She didn't know what had gotten her younger sister so irritated, but Miranda was hard-pressed to think of a time when she'd seen the girl in a worse fit of pique.

"Shut up!" Shannon shouted. "Shut up, *shut up!* I hate you, sis! You helped make me into a laughingstock! When that woman mocked me, you didn't even help me!"

Wait, Miranda thought. *Something's off about her.*

Miranda stared at her younger sister for a moment before realization hit her—Shannon was staring directly at her face, but her eyes weren't glowing.

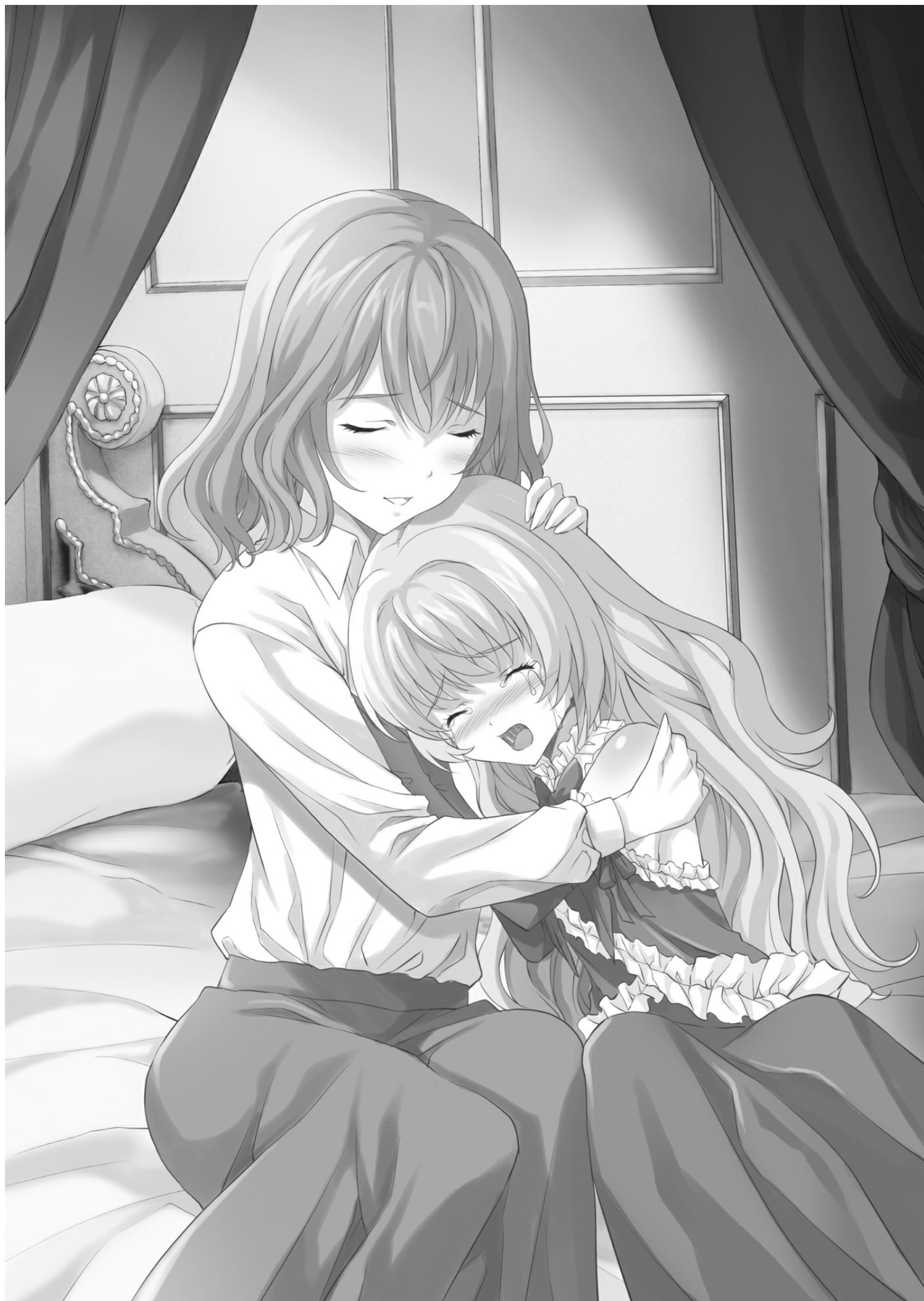
Miranda's eyes went wide. "Shannon, you..."

Shannon wept. She sniffled and wiped away her tears. "Yeah, I can see. Your face, my hands... I can see everything now! But *why*?! Before, I couldn't see anything, but now... Now, it's too late! What's the point in getting to see now?!"

Miranda pulled Shannon's door shut behind her, fully stepping into her younger sister's bedroom. Clutching the pillow that Shannon had thrown at her, she walked over to Shannon's bed and took a seat.

She must be panicking now that she can see, Miranda thought, heart aching. Sadness, joy, all sorts of emotions bubbled up and exploded within Miranda's chest.

Setting the pillow to one side, Miranda embraced her sister. "Shannon, I'm sorry," she said softly, her voice sincere. "I'm sorry I didn't save you back then."



Shannon wailed, clinging to Miranda, as the older girl remembered *that day*—the day Shannon had obtained her orphic eyes.

I wound up hurting Shannon that day, Miranda thought sadly. Back when that monster came to visit House Circry. Still, after showing off Shannon to House Walt, father was able to create some distance between our houses. It turned out to be the right decision. That house is already—

Miranda shook her head, casting off her memories. It was more important to stay present with Shannon right now.

Holding her younger sister tightly, Miranda said gently, “I’m sorry. Really, I am. And I’m happy for you—you can see normally now, right? There must be loads of things you want to do.”

“I want to go outside!” Shannon said through her sobs.

Miranda smiled, just slightly. “All right, let’s go out, then. You wanted to go shopping, right?”

“Yeah!” Shannon sniffled. “And I want to pick out my own sweets! Lots and lots of them!”

Miranda nodded. “Okay,” she agreed, “we’ll go shopping, then. We’ll buy so many sweets you won’t be able to eat them all. And...it’s going to be all right. We’ll be together from now on.”

I’ll protect you. I won’t let that woman touch you ever again.

And so Miranda stayed by her sister’s side, waiting until at last Shannon fell asleep, exhausted from all her crying.

With a still heavy heart, I stepped out of my bedroom. There was no point in hiding in there anymore—I’d get no peace now that Novem was standing at my door constantly pleading me to come out, and even if she left, I’d have to deal with my automaton, who seemed determined to find a way inside my room even though I’d locked myself in.

“There’s something wrong with that girl’s head,” I muttered, referring to the automaton.

Even though she constantly insulted me, she also gladly looked after me. Not to mention, she got this weird look on her face whenever she saw Novem.

Perhaps she feels a sense of competition? I mused.

I sighed heavily, stepping farther into the hall, only to run directly into Miranda, who'd just come walking out of Shannon's room.

"Ah," I said, rather stiffly. "Hello."

Miranda looked up at me, her eyes a bit red. "Oh, dear," she said softly.

As I mulled over how best to approach her, Miranda suddenly started to giggle.

There was a barely contained, "Pfft," from within the Jewel, but nothing else. It seemed clear that my ancestors were holding themselves back from saying anything, letting me handle the situation on my own.

I'll have to interrogate them after this to find out who laughed, I thought, feeling a bit irritated. Then, staring awkwardly at Miranda, I scratched at my head. *Best to start with a greeting,* I decided.

"Good evening, Miranda."

"Yeah, I guess it's already that late, huh? Hey, Lyle... Do you want to talk for a bit?"

I nodded, a bit surprised at how much more at ease she seemed with me than she had before. She gestured for me to follow her, and so we walked together out to the yard, where we sat next to each other on a wooden bench.

"I just thought I should get this out of the way," Miranda started. "Lyle, you're from the House of Earl Walt, right? Not the Central branch?"

"Yes," I said, nodding. "Although they've kicked me out."

Even though my family had driven me away, House Walt would always be where I'd come from. Nothing was going to change that fact.

"I see," Miranda muttered. She lifted her head, locking eyes with me. "I want you to listen seriously to what I'm about to say. This will also be my answer to

what you asked me in the dungeon, about why I sought power. About why I came to Aramthurst with Shannon in the first place. The answer is...it was because of your sister. Shannon and I, we both ran away.”

“Wh-What?” I said. I couldn’t understand what she could have meant by that. “I don’t think I’m fully understanding what you’re saying here. What does Shannon have to do with—?”

“We were cast aside by our family, to be more precise,” Miranda continued. “But I’ve made use of that. It happened three years ago, when I met your sister, Ceres. We had a family gathering at our estate, and we invited House Walt.”

My heart sped up at the sound of Ceres’s name. Images of my past self flashed through my mind—I could recall all too clearly how pathetic I’d been, how I’d been unable to lift even a finger against her. Then I heard the founder’s voice, telling me I was the only one who could possibly defeat her.

“That day,” Miranda continued, “Ceres mocked Shannon. She made my sister a laughingstock in front of everyone. But, that was my father’s goal—he wanted to use Shannon and her disability to distance House Circry from House Walt, as he’d heard many shady rumors swirling around them recently. But, in the end, the whole thing turned out to be unnecessary. The engagement that had been agreed upon between you and I was little more than a verbal promise. It was annulled easily enough.”

“That guy makes me sick,” the sixth head spat, enraged at the fact that Shannon’s father had used her blindness as a political tool. “This is why court nobles...” he trailed off, too angry to continue.

Making use of Shannon’s disability is certainly not the most praiseworthy way he could have gone about distancing himself from House Walt, I agreed silently.

“From what she’s told me,” Miranda continued in a serious voice, “Shannon wants to get back at Ceres. But, even at a glance, I could tell that dream of hers was hopeless.” Miranda took a deep breath, then continued, “We only met her the once. Just the once, but immediately she had our relatives wrapped around her little finger. It felt like I was going crazy as I watched it happen. I rushed Shannon out of the hall, made any excuse I could to have as little interaction with that woman as possible...but I was scared. More scared than I’d ever been

before.”

This was no surprise to me—I’d seen it all firsthand. Ceres was terrifying. I couldn’t even think about her without getting the chills.

“Around that time, Ceres started popping up around Central pretty often. I realized what had happened with Shannon’s eyes, and I knew that if she tried to get her revenge against Ceres, something terrible would happen to her. Exiling her to Aramthurst was the right decision. I followed her here half for her sake, but also half for my own. I had to quell my own fears. That’s what drove me to become strong.”

So that was why Miranda was so strong for an Academy student, I thought, nodding in understanding. But even though I understand that now, I don’t really get why she’s telling me all this.

“But Miranda, didn’t you say you’ve never had any trouble doing anything before? Aren’t you a genius?”

“I don’t struggle, certainly. I’ve been able to do almost everything I’ve set my mind to. I manifested an Art and got it to its third stage almost immediately. But even with all that, I knew I wouldn’t always be able to win. Also...I wouldn’t exactly call myself a genius. At best, you could say I don’t have many weaknesses. If Aria or Sophia decided on a path to specialize in and put in a bit of effort, I doubt I’d be able to win against them.”

As I tried to get a sense of what she was saying, Miranda looked straight at me. “Ever since coming here to Aramthurst, I’ve been spread thin,” she said with a troubled laugh. “This whole time, I’ve been worrying over getting stronger and having to protect Shannon at the same time. But from here on out, you’re going to take responsibility, just like you promised, aren’t you? So it’s okay for me to rely on you?”

Knowing I couldn’t make any careless remarks, I nodded. “Of course,” I swore.

The two of us were comrades—I had no problem with her relying on me. Plus, if I picked this moment to tell her that she’d misunderstood me back in the dungeon... Well, it would only overcomplicate things. Worst-case scenario, things could get even more ugly than when she’d fought with me back then.

Miranda smiled. “You lied to me, didn’t you, Lyle?”

I immediately broke out into a cold sweat. My heart sped up so fast I thought it would give out completely.

“See, I just had to think a bit, and then I figured it out. Something didn’t seem right—it didn’t *fit* right. But...” Miranda reached over and held my hand tightly. “I am a very difficult woman. I’ll be your number one someday. I’ll kick Novem, Aria, and Sophia down the ladder, until I alone stand at the top. Ah, and don’t worry. I know I’m late to the party, so I’m not going to complain about you having lovers or mistresses. But I *will* be your favorite.”

How...am I supposed to respond to that?

I brushed my hand against the Jewel, hoping for some advice, but the group of unreliable louts I had as ancestors just gave me a string of excuses.

“Don’t come to me for love advice,” the second head said. “Also, I was devoted to my wife. I never had to deal with something like this.”

“I, too, had a lovely wife,” the third head agreed. “That was enough for me.”

“Naturally. It’s crazy to have more than one,” the fourth head muttered.

“Heed my words, Lyle,” the fifth head said seriously. “Let the women fight amongst themselves. Don’t get involved. That’s the only advice I’m going to give you.”

The sixth head chuckled. “Lyle, I understand how you feel—painfully well, in fact. But a man simply has no way to put a halt to these sorts of things.”

I could practically hear the seventh head rolling his eyes. “You did that all to yourself, father. Still, it seems Miranda is a woman whose love is very intense. You should be careful, Lyle.”

Seeing the troubled look on my face, Miranda leaned forward, intent. “I’ll make you say you love me one day,” she swore. “I’ll never let you go.”

For a moment, I felt like I saw a giant spider looming over Miranda’s back. It disappeared once I rubbed my eyes, but then my brain assailed me with a sudden image of myself, caught up in a web.

As I still struggled to get my bearings, Miranda said casually, “Looks like it’s

getting dark. I have to prepare dinner, so I'll get going. Make sure you come to eat at the table with the rest of us, okay, Lyle?"

I nodded, then watched her as she disappeared into the house. It was only after she'd fully disappeared that I realized how sweaty I'd become.

"What does she mean by 'responsibility' exactly?" I asked my ancestors, a little afraid of hearing the answer.

The usually aloof third head's voice turned serious as he answered, "It's the price you pay for things," he said. "In Miranda's case...well, I guess it's your life."

I plopped my head into one of my hands. *So I have to pay with my life, huh...?*

No matter how I looked at it, that level of responsibility seemed far too heavy for a situation that had been born from a case of pretend pick-up. It seemed that my "rebellious phase," as it was called by my ancestors, had come at a high cost indeed...

Chapter 55: Boinga

When Sophia and Aria finally ventured outside of their rooms to eat, their eyes were blank and dead. They looked horribly haggard, in a way that wasn't only due to lack of nutrition. The memories of what they'd done during their Growth must have whittled away at their minds.

I could understand what they were feeling painfully well. However, the way they'd acted hadn't been anywhere near as terrible as what I'd ended up doing.

Even as haggard as half of us were feeling, once we all gathered around the dining table, we naturally got to talking about this and that. Before long, we'd learned that Shannon had regained her sight, and Novem in particular seemed delighted to hear it.

"Wow, you can see now? That's great," she said, a slight smile darting across her lips.

Still, despite the joyous occasion, Shannon was acting a bit strange. "Thank you," she told Novem. "But, honestly...my memories of yesterday and the day before are a bit vague, to be honest. I know I returned home, and then I went to my room...and I know that sis came in to talk to me. I can't remember what our conversation was about, though."

Miranda gave a jolly laugh and said, "It must have been quite a hectic time for you. But, although I let you sleep yesterday, you're going to be doing some real work today."

Shannon froze. She seemed adamant about *not* doing that. "I...I'm still a little delirious, you know."

"I see," Miranda said with a smile. "And?"

Shannon quivered and replied, "N-Never mind. I didn't say anything."

Now that Shannon had brought up the events of two days' prior, Aria's and Sophia's shoulders jerked up in response. They began shaking, their faces turned red in shame. It was at that moment that Miranda chose to make her

declaration.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said casually. “I’m joining the race to become Lyle’s lover. Let’s have a clean game, and all that.”

An air of tension spread across the dinner table.

“Ugh...ow!” the sixth head moaned. “It’s not even *my* love life, but my stomach is acting up... Dammit! There’s nowhere to run in this damn Jewel.”

“This sense of tension... It’s awful,” the fourth head chimed in.

Meanwhile, Aria and Sophia were staring fixedly at my face.

“What is she talking about, Lyle?”

“Yeah, what exactly happened while we weren’t looking?”

Their eyes were scary. I averted my gaze, stealing a glance at Novem. She had a troubled look on her face, but I didn’t get a bad feeling from her like I did the others.

“Well... It shouldn’t be an issue,” she said slowly, nodding. “I don’t mind.”

Novem! Couldn’t you mind, even just a little bit?! Do you hate me or something?! I paused, a realization coming over me. Well, come to think of it, there are hardly any factors that would actually make her like me... Maybe she’s sick of me already.

These thoughts were interrupted by Shannon, who spat, “It’s your fault that sis went crazy! You’d better take responsibility!”

“Now hold on,” I rebutted, “This is the result of me taking responsibility!”

Shannon narrowed her eyes at me, unconvinced. It seemed she didn’t have the best impression of me. Her tone with me was pretty antagonistic, and, how should I put it...? She kind of acted a bit like a little sister, so I wasn’t fond of her either. Honestly, I despised the whole concept of little sisters at this point, which certainly wasn’t helping the situation.

Into this strained atmosphere, Miranda boldly decided to make another declaration. “Also...if I’m setting my sights anywhere, it has to be the top. If any of you think you’ll be fine being his second favorite, or you don’t care where

you are in the ranking as long as you can stay by his side, then you should start showing me some respect. Lyle's new number one is coming through. Ah, for the time being, I'm aiming for the position Novem is occupying right now."

The air grew even more tense.

"H-Hold on one second!" Aria refuted. "Novem is his former fiancée! And, and...hasn't your personality changed a bit too much, Miranda?!"

Miranda turned to her with cold eyes. "Unfortunately, I was born this way. Also, *former* fiancée doesn't mean anything. It's *former*, and it's not like they're married or anything. Not to mention...Lyle hasn't laid a hand on anyone yet, right?"

Sophia's face turned red. She stood and objected, "Th-That has nothing to do with... Well, it does, but you're talking about what happens after a proper marriage! Miranda, what's gotten into you? This isn't like you at all."

Miranda chuckled. "I think this is the most like me I've ever been. And what do you mean by 'happens,' exactly? I was talking about a *kiss*, myself. How far did your imagination take you, Sophia? Well, if I could wager a guess..."

Sophia fell into her seat, red to her ears, and curled into a ball.

"Those two idiots are no match for her," the second head said with a sigh. "Now then, as for the all-important Novem..." He looked at her through my eyes, then let out a terrified squeak.

Confused, I took a closer look at Novem myself—she was smiling.

"It's good to have goals," she told Miranda, voice saccharine. "I'm glad you're so eager about it."

Miranda smiled back at her, but for some reason her expression sent chills down my spine.

"Huh?!" the seventh head cried out from the Jewel. "Father—I mean, the sixth head just...! The fifth's gone too?! Ah, and now the fourth head's just collapsed!"

From what I could tell just from listening to the chaos, it seemed the fifth and sixth heads had vanished. *Maybe they escaped by diving into their rooms of*

memory, I mused.

Then, my automaton appeared, smacking a ladle against a frying pan. It was so out of the blue the tension in the room immediately lessened.

“Have you finished your inconsequential bickering already?” she demanded. “Personally, there is a very important issue that I would like to have resolved with all due haste.”

I latched right on to this new conversation topic, feeling a bit saved. “Wh-What’s this important issue?” I asked.

“My name!”

With her mouth full of sandwich, Shannon mumbled, “It’s Authomathon, wight?”

The automaton whirled around on her, face indignant. “*Huh?* Are you an idiot? Naming me ‘Automaton’ is just as idiotic as naming a dog ‘Dog.’ Please understand at least that much!”

“Oh, shut it!” Shannon shot back, having now swallowed her bite of sandwich. “Why are you being so mean to me, anyways? Are you only kind to Lyle or something?”

She seems to have quite the tough mentality, all things considered, I thought, watching Shannon and the automaton volley insults back and forth.

“Since when is she nice to me?” I asked Shannon. “She calls me a ‘damn chicken.’”

“But that’s it! Other than that, she’s devoted to you!”

“Shannon’s right, Lyle,” Aria agreed. “She treats you special. The rest of us might as well be a sideshow.”

The automaton stared at her blankly, as if confused.

Despite being a machine, she’s incredibly expressive, I thought.

“What are you talking about?” the automaton finally asked Aria. “It’s only natural I treat my master with special care. I’d think that would be self-evident. After all, my master has been registered as that waste of chicken space, and no

one else. What else *would* you be to me, besides a sideshow?"

Jeez, I thought, wincing. She just says whatever she wants.

Seeing as how everyone was glaring at the automaton coldly, I figured we were probably heading in a bad direction. So, I decided to give an order.

"We're all allies here," I told her. "So could you treat them a bit better?"

The automation fidgeted and looked at me with pleading eyes. "I-If you happen to decide on a name for me, I might feel motivated to follow that order..."

Does an automaton really need to be motivated? I thought, internally rolling my eyes. *Still...* I looked at her. I observed her from head to toe, until my eyes finally settled on her pigtails—mainly, on their curly ends. Every time she moved, they bounced up and down. Watching them, it felt like I could hear a springy *boing, boing* sound in my head.

"All right, then." I decided. "I call you...Boinga."

Boinga sent me a deeply distressed look. It almost looked like she was going to burst into tears at any moment.

"Umm, no, wait... I mean, I am happy to receive a name from you, my useless chicken—truly, I'm incredibly happy! But, if possible...could I ask for a reroll?"

She doesn't like the name I thought up for her...? I thought, feeling a bit sad.

But it seemed the others agreed, as they were all giving me frosty looks.

Aria licked some sauce off her fingers, then finally asked, "Lyle, are you for real?"

Sophia's brow twitched; she was clearly weirded out. "Seriously, that's a bit much, don't you think? Even if you're trying to get back at her, well...you know."

"Right. Maybe something a *little* better," Miranda said with a troubled face.

Shannon was the worst of the bunch... She held her stomach, laughing. "You're absolutely terrible! You have no sense at all!"

The look on Novem's face could only be described as pity, hidden behind a

smile. “Milord...my apologies. I cannot stick up for you.”

Huh...? Was it really that bad? I wondered.

It must have been, since my ancestors seemed to concur.

“Lyle, listen to me. *Do not* be the one who names your kids,” the second head said fervently, hammering the point in.

The third head was usually laughing and messing around. But right now, that portion of his personality seemed to have been wiped away. “This is a serious issue. There’s no room for jokes or lightheartedness here.”

“Lyle, please give it a bit more thought!” the fourth head warned me, even though he seemed to be in agonizing pain. “Ah, my stomach! I can’t bear this atmosphere...”

The fifth and sixth were absent, so all that was left was the seventh head, who usually took my side...

There was a long silence, and then he said, “Lyle...for starters, why don’t you go read a book on names?”

Even he didn’t support me?! I thought, wilting. What do I do? I have no allies here. But I don’t want to back down either... Guess I’ll have to take the middle ground.

“All right,” I agreed. “Then your name is temporarily Boinga until an official one is decided.”

Boinga (temp) took on a relieved, prayerlike pose. “I’ll accept that gladly. Oh, so there’s still hope... Maybe there is a god after all!”

Once I’d finished breakfast, I decided to drop by the Guild. We’d already put in a report, for what that was worth, but we’d still left a number of things unresolved due to everything that happened. Paying Clara just happened to be one of those things.

Before we’d started out, Novem had given Clara her down payment along with some money to cover necessary expenses, but our contract stated that each of our party members was due to receive a cut of our final earnings. Supporters like Clara typically were paid around seventy percent of what the

fighters made. That said, we needed to swiftly calculate our earnings and divide it as promised.

As I walked up to the reception desk, Novem at my side, I couldn't shake the feeling that many eyes were following me.

"Why're they focusing on me?" I muttered under my breath.

I didn't concern myself with it too much, though. I was more worried about how I was going to deal with the cynical Guild receptionist. We hadn't stopped by for a few days, and I waited with a heavy heart for what snark he'd spew this time. With that in mind, I cringed internally, waiting for my turn at the desk. But when we finally got there...

"Th-This is the evaluation of the Demonic Stones you've turned in. Umm... Is there anything you're unsatisfied with?"

I blinked. As it turned out, the receptionist was taking a very different tack with us this time around. He was being...exceptionally serviceable.

"U-Uh, no, I don't have any issues," I stammered in return.

The Guild receptionist sent me a look of heartfelt relief, then dove into all the other things we needed to do in order to mark the request complete. Once it was all over and done with, he lowered his head to my respectfully.

"Splendid work."

Huh...? I thought, baffled. His polite attitude had already caught me off guard, but now things were becoming flat-out weird. *Where's the guy who used to look down at me and insult me at every turn?*

He wasn't the only one who was acting weird, though—the mood in the rest of the Guild hall was similarly odd. I perked up my ears, trying to listen in on the rumors the other adventurers were spreading.

"So, that's the man the Great Seven took a liking to?" I heard one person murmur.

"Yeah," another person agreed. "I heard he got an *automaton* as a reward. So, uh...what's an automaton?"

In another portion of the room, I heard someone whisper, "The Academy

issued him a permit to enter the dungeon right away, didn't they? That's pretty amazing..."

Whoever they were talking to scoffed. "Stupid, the *real* amazing thing is how he cleared the fortieth floor with less than ten party members!"

Novem took in the reactions of the adventurers around us, then nodded as if the reason for the receptionist's shift in attitude was self-evident. "It seems he's learned of our connections to the Academy, milord."

Seems like forming a friendly relationship with Professor Damian is proving useful here at the Guild, I thought appreciatively. I mean, people told us how much power the Academy has in this city, but I didn't expect the rumors to spread this far. Especially since all that happened was he remembered my name...

"Well, this should make it easier for us to do our jobs, at least," I said, relieved.

The sixth head, however, didn't seem to agree with me.

"You're still a greenhorn, Lyle," he said. "Things never work out this well in the world. But, putting that aside, I believe all of us here in the Jewel have something we need to give a bit of thought."

That last statement made me feel oddly anxious. *What are they pondering over in there?*

In the end, I just shrugged it off and made my way to Aramthurst's marketplace so I could sell our monster materials to the city's merchants.

Aramthurst's monster material marketplace operated out of a warehouse. It was easy enough for us to get in and sell what we had, but according to them, they didn't deal in materials from floor bosses. That meant we could only sell them the weapons and usable parts we'd gathered from normal monsters, which left us with a decent amount of extra materials.

"You're sure you're not able to buy them?" I wheedled.

The merchant gave me a conflicted look. "Well, the thread's fine. There are

ways to use it, yeah? But the exoskeleton? It's heavy and hard, and I don't know what it'd be good to use for. I mean, it would be useless as a carriage—imagine how many horses it would take to pull that thing! And that cylinder boss thing? Yeah, go ahead, tell me what I'm supposed to do with *that*. I'd take the materials from the tenth and twentieth floor bosses over them."

Once upon a time, there had apparently been requests from the Academy for those boss monsters' parts to use for research purposes, but unfortunately that time had passed. There was no longer any demand.

"Well, that leaves us with quite the problem," I said.

"Well, milord," Novem said, "if we can't sell the parts, that means our only options are to keep them or throw them away. If we discard them in the dungeon, they'll just be absorbed into its walls. Wouldn't that be the most efficient way to go about it?"

Hmm... I thought. The metal exoskeleton of the box spider is especially large—I can't just toss it in some random place. And Novem's right, if I leave it in the dungeon, it'll eventually assimilate it, meaning I don't have to worry about cleanup.

I'd heard before that the fact that dungeons had this ability, to absorb things into their walls, was the reason they didn't end up packed with the corpses of monsters or adventurers.

"That sounds like a good idea, Novem," I finally agreed. "And still, even without selling those parts, we earned ourselves a pretty penny. I wasn't sure it was going to turn out so well—I thought a bunch of what we grabbed might just end up as scrap metal."

I was referring to all the weapons and armor we'd gathered from the different monsters in the dungeon—they'd been made of metal, for the most part.

"I mean, they will, to a degree," the merchant pointed out. "A lot of these are made of good quality iron, so there's plenty of ways to repurpose it. It might take a while to reforge, but as long as we've got enough Demonic Stones to use as fuel, we can manage it. Iron's always in demand—you can sell it anywhere. It's a valuable product."

If you put it that way, the dungeon diving almost sounds like it could be a mining operation, I thought. The city must see it as a treasure trove, since it endlessly produces material. If he's right, all the iron people bring back must be a valuable source of income for Aramthurst.

The merchant laughed. "The most valuable thing of all was the iron rarium, though. We've really gotta give our thanks to the dungeon."

We'd gotten the iron rarium from some of the treasure chests we'd found scattered throughout the dungeon's various floors. Their contents had been largely metal, with some of that metal emitting mana—AKA rarium. If you took its existence into account, Aramthurst's dungeon became even more valuable.

As for us, we'd managed to obtain a massive amount of gold coins just by completing a single job. The place was obviously a real moneymaker—for both adventurers *and* merchants. With a word of thanks to the merchant, Novem and I gathered up all the coins we'd been paid for our materials.

Next up was the library, where we'd planned to rendezvous with Clara.

We held our meeting with Clara in the library's break area. The main subject was her payment for the job, so we took some time to explain to her how we hadn't been able to sell the floor boss materials before we laid out how much money we'd made in sales. Then we moved on to discuss her cut, which we handed over immediately.

As no one else was around, Clara counted out her wages on the spot.

"All right..." she said finally, a hint of surprise in her voice. "I confirm that I have received my payment. This is the first time I've made this much with just one job."

"But I heard you were a highly regarded supporter," said Novem. "Shouldn't you be making this much regularly?"

Tucking the coins away, Clara shook her head. "People tend to make light of supporters, and the parties that provide proper pay have exclusive ones they patronize. I rarely have any chances to work with groups like that, so I'm thankful to receive proper payment at all."

“Why don’t you join a party, then?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

A troubled look scrunched up Clara’s face. “If I join a party, I won’t be able to use my time freely, as I see fit. I don’t want to give up the library—I like it here, and I’m able to obtain information in droves. These walls contain more knowledge than I will ever know.”

“It is a nice place,” the third head agreed. “I’d go so far as to say I’d like to live in here. But could you tell her it’s nice to go outside sometimes, Lyle? She should learn more about the outside world and experience new things. That makes the knowledge even more interesting.”

At his request, I replied, “Heading outside and experiencing new things can be fun too. It makes the books even more enjoyable... Or, at least, that’s what I think.”

“Yes, that might be important,” Clara agreed, looking a bit awkward. “But people flock to the good parties. Their supporter slots fill up in no time at all.”

That seemed to be her final word on the matter, and so our conversation came to an end.

That night, Novem went out into the yard of the Circry’s home. She was standing there in the dark, staring up at the moon and thinking of the future, when she sensed someone else’s presence. She turned to see Miranda slowly approaching.

“Hey, can we talk a bit?” the other girl asked.

Novem nodded, then returned to looking at the moon. “Do you need something from me?”

Miranda stared at Novem’s profile, her face hardening. “I don’t like you,” she said baldly.

“Is that so?” Novem asked, voice bland. “I’m glad you’re being honest.”

I don’t particularly want to be liked, regardless, Novem thought. Lyle is the most important thing to me. Anything else is—

“He loves you more than anyone,” Miranda went on, “and I hate how you’re

always slipping around and evading Lyle's advances. I *hate* how you've tamed Aria and Sophia—those two idiots—and convinced them that this situation is normal." Miranda's tone turned ugly; she practically spat her next words from her mouth. "And, I just can't figure it out—why are you trying to place other women at Lyle's side in the first place?"

Novem's expression subtly shifted. There were a few things she could say to reply to Miranda's question, but she didn't feel particularly inclined to answer. She was fundamentally disinterested in the other girl's evaluation of her. There was one thought, though, that refused to evaporate.

It's not like I enjoy doing it.

Noticing she was biting her lower lip, Novem immediately smoothed over her expression. "Is that all you came out here to say? Am I to understand that you'd like me to leave entirely?"

Miranda shrugged, composing herself once more. "I'm not going to be that petty. I want to be Lyle's number one, and I know he'd hate me if I forced you to leave. Also, this is just my instincts talking here, but..." There was a long silence, and then Miranda spoke in a tone far more reserved than she'd taken before. "Shannon's eyes...was that you?"

Novem did not answer.

With a sigh, Miranda went on, "As her sister, you have my gratitude. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything," Novem insisted, but the other girl simply laughed it off.

"I'll leave it at that," Miranda said, turning her back and returning to the house. "You're not doing much to quell my curiosity, anyway."

Once she was alone again, Novem let her head hang low. A flicker of misery went through her. "Don't act like you know anything about us," she snapped to the silent yard. "How do you think I...?"

Novem's fist clenched as she desperately contained her emotions.

I've gotten quite emotional today, she thought, taking a deep breath. Just as she was blowing it slowly back out, something fell into the yard.

Novem's head jerked around, and the first thing she saw was Lyle.

A short while earlier...

"Damnit, Boinga," I said, narrowing my eyes at the automaton who had infiltrated my room. "I swear, you're going to be stuck with that name if you keep this up."

The automaton just continued with her persistent, indirect nagging, which she'd been doing long enough to get me quite irritated. Before she'd forced her way into my room, I'd been working through some calculations based on the funds my party had available, which I hadn't been able to do before we'd got our earnings in order earlier in the day.

"Does she really hate the name I gave her that much?" I muttered to myself.

"She must, if she wants it changed that badly," the third head said, apparently having decided to speak on her behalf. "Isn't that obvious?"

Boinga's complaints increased in volume once again, to the point where I just couldn't handle it anymore. Desperate to get away, I stood up and leapt straight out of my bedroom window. I landed in the yard with a *thump*, and looked up to find Novem staring at me with a shocked expression.

"Novem!" I cried out, startled.

Her expression quickly shifted from surprise to dismay. She pressed an exasperated hand to her face. "Lord Lyle, it is dangerous to jump out of windows. Please don't do it again, all right?"

"My bad," I apologized. "But, uh...what are you doing out here, anyway?"

"I was enjoying the night breeze," she informed me. "A very pleasant wind is blowing today, if you haven't noticed."

Now that she mentions it, the wind is pretty nice, I mused. It's far better than the sweltering air inside that house, anyway.

"I guess I'll join you for a while and cool off, then," I told her, deciding to stay for a while. "I was getting sleepy doing all that recordkeeping, anyway."

There were so many things that needed to be jotted down: the contents of the request we'd taken, how much money it had taken us to prepare for our excursion, how many floors we'd descended, how many supplies we had left over, which materials had sold for the most money, which had sold for the least, and so on and so forth. I'd listed it all out just as the fourth head had taught me, but it had ended up taking up quite a bit of my time.

Relaxing now that I had a break, I walked up next to Novem and lifted my arms out, stretching my aching muscles.

As I did, Novem stared at the moon above us. "Milord," she asked, "are you happy right now?"

I folded my arms, thinking her question through. I was very aware of the fact that I was still lacking a good amount of experience as an adventurer, and that I'd been failing a lot recently. I had my ancestors in the Jewel to come to my aid, but they were many times entirely useless, and, on top of that, were quite disorderly as a group—in fact, I considered every one of them terrible people. When it came to my party, I thought I had a good dynamic with Aria, Sophia, Miranda, and even Shannon, but with the deeper the relationships between me and them grew, the more trouble would begin to crop up. On top of that, I now was the master of a strange automaton named Boinga, who would have to be added to the mix. Honestly, it all gave me a headache.

I hadn't forgotten Novem either—as per usual, she never seemed to grow angry no matter how many women I had around me. Troublingly enough, she even seemed to endorse the idea of placing an even greater number at my side. What's more, she'd been making sure that they all qualified for the position by measuring them up against the precepts that the founder had laid out long ago. Which, as it turned out, were all just a bunch of nonsense the founder spouted when he'd been drunk. Not that Novem knew that—all she knew was that they'd been passed down in my family and held dear.

Honestly, looking back on everything now... It feels like I've faced nothing but problems ever since I was kicked out of my family's estate.

"I don't know that I'm happy," I finally told Novem. "But I can say I'm having a lot more fun than I ever did back at the Walt estate."

Back then, Novem had been the only one who really talked to me. I'd been practically confined to my room. When I thought of that, I could give my ancestors a little slack. They might be a bit overly boisterous, but they still took the time to offer me advice. And, even if it was a little problematic that my comrades were all women, I was just happy that I was able to talk to other human beings at all now.

"How about you, Novem?" I asked back. "Are you happy?"

Novem seemed to struggle a bit to find her answer. When she finally spoke, her tone had taken on a bit of humor. "Well, let's see," she said. "I'm happy that you're more cheerful than back then, milord. But I must say that I feel sorry that you lost your first kiss like that."

Novem giggled, then went on to tease me a little over what had happened with Boinga. My ancestors were laughing as well—I could hear them losing it inside the Jewel.

Don't tell me I'm going to be teased about this for the rest of my life... I moaned internally.

"Well, why don't I leave the jokes at that," Novem said with a smile. "So... Lord Lyle?"

By that point, I'd relaxed, my shoulders dropping from their tense position up around my neck. *I expected her to be a bit more relentless than that*, I thought, relieved at the reprieve.

I was so distracted, I only noticed that her face was drifting toward mine at the last moment.

"N-Novem? What are yo—?"

Novem's lips brushed lightly against mine, silencing me. When she pulled away, she brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear and smiled at me, her eyes on mine. There was a faint blush to her cheeks, and her expression had a tinge of mischief to it, like she was a child who'd just done something naughty. Lit up by the moonlight, there was something fantastical to her, like she was an apparition I'd dreamed up.

"So..." Novem said again, her voice growing a bit anxious, "I decided to take

the liberty of claiming your second kiss. Does that displease you?"

"Not at all!" I said frantically, shaking my head. "In fact, I'd like to do that more often!"

Her lips curved into a wry smile. "Well, I don't know about..."

Dejected, I sank into a squat, my head drooping toward the ground.

Novem let out a little squeak of surprise, then said hurriedly, "I'm just kidding—don't look so depressed!"

She pulled me back to my feet, then wrapped her arms around me. I took a deep breath, breathing in a nice, gentle fragrance that she must have picked up while she was in the bath. My hands stirred at my side, lifting up and curling around her so I could hug her back. I felt like I might snap her in half if I held her too tightly, but I just reminded myself that Novem was strong. She wouldn't break.

"Lord Lyle..." she whispered softly. "I'm sorry."

My brow furrowed in confusion. *What is she apologizing about? For kissing me? Or for answering my question with a joke? Well, regardless...*

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "I'm not bothered."

We stayed there a while, locked in one another's embrace as the time passed us by. I looked up at the sky above us, and thought, *The moon sure is beautiful tonight.*

Epilogue

Once Lyle and Novem began hugging, the ancestral heads cut off their view of the outside world.

“Ah, the innocence of youth,” the third head said, sarcastic as always. “A tainted man like me can’t help but be jealous, seeing something like that.”

“Moving past that,” the fourth head said, rubbing at his stomach as if it pained him, “it seems Lyle has taken on yet another troublesome woman. He’s going to have to deal with more than his share of drama.”

“But that’s no big deal, is it?” the sixth head asked, chuckling. “Miranda’s a good woman.”

This phrase provoked an immediate negative reaction from the fifth and seventh heads.

“A ‘good woman,’ huh?” the fifth head asked, his tone leery. “So, she’s one of *those*. Ah, Lyle, I pity you.”

“Seriously, father,” the seventh head broke in. “The so-called ‘good women’ you always talk about generally have quite a few *very* pressing issues. Take mother, for instance.”

“No need to talk about them like that,” the sixth head said disapprovingly. “They just loved a little more intensely than other people, that’s all. Doesn’t mean they weren’t good women.”

The fifth head glared at his son. “How much trouble do you think I had to go through thanks to those *good women* of yours?” he demanded. “They were forever coming to me with all manner of grievances about you, and whenever I heard them out and tried to pacify them, next thing I knew I’d have *my* wives complaining to me about it. How do you think I felt, being stuck in that endless loop of complaints?”

The seventh head’s eyes were cold. He didn’t look any more impressed with the sixth head than his grandfather did. “That sounds ever so convincing coming

from *you*, father,” he spat. “Ah, yes—they were such *good women* you had to put me to use getting you away from them. I feel deeply enlightened.”

“Huh? What’s all this?” the third head asked, amused. “Were the sixth head’s wives really that bad? They all at least passed the precepts, right?”

“They sure did!” the sixth head declared. “It doesn’t matter how much you pour over those precepts, you’d never be able to find any wife that compared to mine!”

“That would be true,” the fifth head said, his eyes tired, “if you’d chosen only *one* of them. If you’d done that, whoever you chose would have most likely been pretty incredible, and you’d have lived happily ever after. But instead, you chose to marry *three* women, each of them as unbelievably in love with you as the last. I still don’t understand what the point of it all was. Even if you wanted multiple lovers, or to keep mistresses, you always picked the worst possible moment to bring them in.”

There was a loud bang as the sixth head smacked both his hands indignantly against the table. “You had five wives of your own! That’s what I grew up with, so that’s how I thought it was supposed to be, goddamnit! I only learned what marriage was really supposed to be like after the fact!”

The ancestral heads took in this information, then all looked condemningly at the fifth head.

“Nonsense,” the fifth head said flatly. “I told you one was good enough, and that it didn’t matter how many wives you had as long as you had a child that could succeed the title. And, hold on a moment here—you married for love! And yet you *still* brought another woman to the estate, and in no time at all! I honestly don’t even know what to think of that.”

It was rare for nobles like the Walts to get the chance to ignore status and politics in order to marry for love, but the sixth head had apparently done just that. However, if what his father and son had said was true, he’d been out courting someone else not long after he’d married his original beloved.

The ancestral heads all leaned back in their chairs, putting space between themselves and the sixth head.

“Not that the fifth head is one to speak,” the seventh head said, clearing his throat. “Still, the sixth head here is an expert at finding women who are trouble, and he’s proclaimed that Miranda is a good one. She’s going to be quite the headache, guaranteed.”

“Is it really *that* bad?” the fourth head asked. “Oh, not Miranda—I know she’s trouble. I meant the sixth head’s knack for women.”

The seventh head nodded. Not a single soul in the room doubted him for a second.

“While there is much uncertainty in the world,” the seventh head said, “father’s terrible eye for women is the one thing that always hits the mark. In the complete opposite direction of what he intends to hit, of course.”

The ancestral heads all took this in. If they took the seventh head at his word, that meant they definitely had a problem.

“Now look here!” the sixth head exclaimed, eyes narrowing. “You can say that all you want, but when you brought Zenoah home, I told you she was a good woman too, didn’t I? And you married her anyway!”

Zenoah had been the seventh head’s wife, as well as a woman who’d carried the blood of the fallen Centrus Kingdom’s royal line. To think she’d been one of the sixth head’s “good women” too...

“You’re right on that,” the seventh head proclaimed. “But that’s why I married her and *only* her. I knew I could trust your insight. Without anyone to rival her, she really was a good woman. And so, I must thank you for my happy marriage.” The seventh head grinned at his father, triumphant.

The sixth head didn’t reply, but his fist quivered with rage as he watched his son laugh at him.

“I’d like to change the topic, if you don’t mind,” the second head suddenly said. “What do you all think Novem was saying sorry for?”

The eyes of all the ancestral heads gathered on him. It was the first time he’d spoken since the conversation had begun, which was all the more notable due to how contentious it had become.

“I was wondering when you were finally going to speak up,” the fourth head said, shaking his head. “I thought she was apologizing for kissing Lyle, or for the hug she gave him afterward. Was that not correct?”

“Well...” the second head said curiously, cocking his head to the side, “that’s the thing. If you’re examining the situation from an outside point of view, that would make sense. But...”

The second head trailed off, struggling to articulate his point.

It seemed the third head had decided to help him along, because he chimed in, “Is something bothering you?”

“It’s just that, Novem doesn’t usually say, ‘I’m sorry,’ does she? She’s more of a ‘My apologies,’ kinda gal.”

The fourth head inched his glasses up his nose, a thoughtful look settling over his features. “I’m not so sure about that,” he said slowly. “I believe she said ‘I’m sorry,’ back when Lyle had his first Growth as well. Yes, remember? She was laughing at him.”

The third head chuckled. “Well, he was pretty fun to watch.”

“That’s true, but...something’s still off,” the second head said pensively.

Silence fell, and the ancestral heads sat in it for a while. Then the fifth head spoke up.

“Let’s put a pin in that for now,” he said. “Isn’t it about time we had a proper discussion about Lyle’s behavior in the dungeon? What did you all think about it?”

The second head sighed. “It was beyond belief.”

The third head smiled, but his eyes were grim. “He failed utterly,” he said sternly.

“Well, he *did* manage to use multiple Arts simultaneously,” the fourth head pointed out. “He seems to have gotten quite accustomed to handling them efficiently. It takes a certain talent to be able to do that, you know. It’s the way he acts toward his comrades that’s beginning to become an issue.”

“Even if you ignore Miranda’s hand in the matter,” the fifth head said,

pressing a hand to his mouth, “Lyle is currently leaning far too much on his Arts. If he ended up getting knocked out of commission due to the initiation of a Growth period, or was incapacitated for some other reason, the entire party could be easily annihilated.”

“It’s not talent that’s the problem,” the sixth head noted, scratching at his head. “If you look at each individual member of the team, they’re actually quite skilled.”

This was demonstrably true. Aria and Sophia had proved themselves very reliable frontline fighters, and had Arts to boot. Judging by her battle with Lyle, Miranda was more than capable as well, and Novem was an incredible magician. And then there was Lyle himself, who could operate multiple Arts at once, cast spells, and fight well with a sword.

“The problem is that Lyle can fill most roles all by himself,” the seventh head said. “He’s too accomplished, which makes everyone relax their guard. It exposes all of them to danger.”

The ancestral heads fell silent a moment, thinking. The seventh head was right—Lyle’s outstanding level of skill was the crux of the issue. He’d been given too many abilities too fast, and he and his party members had grown too reliant on his usage of them.

Leaning back in his chair, the third head said, “It’s not necessarily a bad thing to rely on Arts, but they can’t be the only thing you’re capable of. Back when Lyle’s Growth initiated, the entire party struggled to make their way out of the dungeon. The fact that they can’t operate without him is a glaring issue.”

And that hadn’t even been the only time that particular problem had reared its head. Once the party had finally made their way back aboveground, none of them had lifted a finger. All those days Lyle had been out of commission, Clara had gone without pay, and the Guild had been without a formal report of their mission.

The fifth head sent the fourth head a look.

Taking the cue, the fourth head took charge, stepping into the familiar role of mediator. “What I’d like to hear next is what you all think we should do,” he said.

“Restrict his use of our Arts,” the second head immediately replied.

“We should set a goal for him while we’re at it,” the third head jumped in. “Let’s say...the thirtieth floor of Aramthurst’s dungeon. If he can make it to that point without using Arts, I think we can consider that a success.”

The fifth head’s eyes drifted to the large silver broadsword floating in an empty spot beside the round table. “We should restrict his usage of that too,” he said, pointing to the weapon the founder had left for Lyle. “If he can use it, he’ll have it far too easy.”

The sixth head rubbed at his chin, thoughtful. He almost seemed to be enjoying himself. “I think it’s best we don’t set a time limit,” he decided. “This’ll be quite interesting. I’m curious to see what method Lyle will use to clear this assignment.”

“I can’t wait,” said the seventh head, who still had high hopes for his beloved grandson. “Plus, I want to see if Lyle is able to catch on to why we’ve made this decision.”

“Very well then,” the fourth head agreed. “Henceforth, Lyle is banned from using our Arts or the silver broadsword. In order to use them again, he must successfully conquer the thirtieth floor of Aramthurst’s dungeon. Does that sound correct?”

All the ancestral heads nodded.

The next morning, I found myself walking to the shed that was at the end of the Circry house’s yard, Boinga at my side. She’d been pestering me to see the materials we’d collected from the floor bosses, and the shed had been the best place I could think of to take them out of storage. According to Miranda, it was where they kept the tools they didn’t use, but there were few tools around the house to begin with. Therefore, the inside of the shed was relatively spacious and free from other items, although it was awfully dusty from lack of use.

Once we were inside, I used Box to remove the exoskeleton of the box spider, as well as the body of the cylindrical monster, which was intact other than the Demonic Stone we had removed. Boinga jumped for joy at the sight.

“How wonderful!” she said, eyes alight. “They’re somewhat old models, but they’re both in splendid condition!”

I gave the materials a doubtful look. It was difficult for me to see what was so wonderful about them, when they couldn’t be sold for anything.

“Are they valuable?” I asked the automaton. “The merchants refused to buy them.”

Boinga gave me a look of abject disbelief. My ancestors, meanwhile, were only half listening to what she had to say. They seemed disinterested in the materials—which they’d already decided were worthless—and more focused on discussing Boinga herself.

“I really don’t get those ancients’ tastes,” the second head said with a sigh. “She’s supposed to be a servant, isn’t she? So why is she like this? You’d think they’d give her a more servile attitude, or at least make her more reserved.”

“You see this thing you refer to as an exoskeleton?” Boinga asked, bringing my attention back to her. “It’s actually called an armored tank, and it allows you to move around while protected by heavy armor. It’s ridiculously hard, you know. It can completely block most attacks.”

I hummed doubtfully, staring at it. “So how many horses do you need in order to pull it? The merchant said it was too heavy for the... Uh, what was it called again?”

I turned to Boinga, but she was just staring at me, looking deeply confused.

“Why’re you bringing up horses?” she asked. “Wait, the technological level here is kind of all over the place, isn’t it? You seem decently advanced in terms of hygiene, and I’ve seen some instances of incredible technological prowess! And you’ve got all those bizarre *Demonic Tools* on top of that, and... Anyway, how has no one ever thought of making a car?”

I definitely wouldn’t call Demonic Tools more bizarre than that exoskeleton, I thought, still trying to decipher the rest of what Boinga had said.

The fourth head seemed to agree with my unspoken sentiment, since he grumbled, “I guess I could see some more value in that thing if it could be moved without horses...”

“Incidentally!” Boinga said, jolting my attention back to her once again. “This cylindrical item is an automated security turret. Although notably, it seems to be malfunctioning. Machines like these were made for different purposes than I was, but roughly speaking, we’re actually quite similar, you know. What’s more, this thing can float, even despite being so heavy! Isn’t that incredible?!”

“Okay...” I said slowly, assimilating this information. “And?”

The look Boinga gave me next felt distinctly watery. “Please wait a second, chicken, my dear, *damn* chicken. Are you understanding me correctly? What you have here is an incredible treasure, in a sense. Just on my own, I’m a peerlessly excellent maid. An absurdly, unrealistically incredible one! You could be a bit happier.”

Well, I’ll admit you’re pretty incredible, I thought. But even if you tell me that, I can’t help but wonder...

“What were the ancients thinking when they designed a maid like you? I am honestly impressed at how needlessly overengineered you are.” I examined her clothes. “Does a servant really need such a tidy outfit? Isn’t it going to get dirty?”

“Never!” Boinga screamed. “My maid uniform was constructed with state-of-the-art technology! It will always remain in a pristine state no matter the conditions! Cleaning is unnecessary!”

“Wait, so you’re not going to wash it at all? Doesn’t that mean it’s probably filthy right now?”

Boinga buckled at the knees, her hands thumping into the floor. She wept in great, heaving sobs.

Honestly, it’s quite impressive that an automaton can cry at all, I thought, watching her.

“Why?!” she wailed. “Why can’t I get my message across? How can you use something as incomprehensible as magic, but still not be able to understand me?!”

Unconcerned with her dramatics, I decided to ask the question that was at the forefront of my mind at the moment. “Since you say these are so valuable,

what exactly do you suggest we do with them?”

Boinga jumped to her feet, her tears instantly vanishing. “Good question,” she said with a friendly smile. “The cylinder is critically damaged, so it will have to serve as parts. We should be able to use it to repair the exoskeleton.”

“I almost felt bad for her, but if she gets back up that quickly...” the seventh head muttered, sounding taken aback by how quickly she’d changed gears. “Do you think it’s because she’s an automaton?”

I glanced over at the cylinder and the exoskeleton, then nodded. “That’s all well and good then...” I agreed. “Oh, come to think of it, I need to head to Professor Damian’s place so I can learn how to use his magic. I should get going.”

Boinga shook her head back and forth, her hands clenched over her ears. Her pigtails airily swung left and right, chasing after her head’s movements.

“Magic! Golem magic, no less!” she shouted. “How absurd can you be? What even is this?!”

The third head snorted. “Yeah, from our point of view, you’re the real absurd one, Boinga,” he quipped. “Although...I am curious where she pulls her hammer out of.”

“It’s probably a similar situation to the seventh head’s Art, don’t you think?” the sixth head asked. “If that’s true, the technology of the ancients really *is* pretty incredible. And Professor Damian said it would be impossible to reproduce it with what we have now, right?”

I pulled myself away from this conversation to raise my eyebrows at Boinga. “Personally speaking, I think you’re pretty absurd yourself,” I told the automaton. “What’s with you forming a mana-transfer line without my permission? Must you suck away my mana whenever you feel like it?”

Boinga lurched back, pressing her hands to her reddened cheeks. The mana-transfer line was invisible, but it ran between us all the same, giving her the energy source she needed to live. Just like the Jewel, she drained the mana I needed in order to function.

The automaton giggled. “Heh heh, we’re connected by an invisible thread of

fate. We're together for life."

I sighed. "You know, you're really like that demon in the dress."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, it's from an old fairy tale," I explained. "Once upon a time, there was a man who happened upon a beautiful lady demon in a dress. She enticed him to form a contract with her using his blood, and when he agreed, the lady demon gave him everything he could have ever wanted in return. From meals to housework, he didn't have to lift a finger. The lady demon granted the man a house and a wife, status and glory, and piles of money. By then, the man decided it was time for his contract to end, since he had everything he could ever dream of. But, the demon refused to release him from it. 'You won't ever be free,' she told him. 'This will *never* end. Not even death will sever the contract between us. You will always belong to me, and so will your children, and your children's children, and every child that comes after that.'"

Boinga nodded along with every word. "Now *that's* a demon I can sympathize with."

"Uh, what part are you sympathizing with, exactly?" the fifth head asked, his voice exasperated.

I continued, "The man realized he could no longer accomplish anything without the demon, but naturally, he couldn't run away from it either. After he died, it's been said that the demon either dragged his soul away, devoured it, or continued to tend to him for all eternity. Those are the three general patterns for the ending."

The thing that remained constant in the tale, no matter the ending, was that even death held no escape for the man. He had bound his immortal soul, as well as those of his entire family, to the demon, just to attain immediate satisfaction. Therefore, the story's morale was: do not be fooled by deals that sound too good to be true.

"I think I understand that story very well," Boinga said, pressing a hand to her chin. "I would love to take a page out of that demon lady's book, and tend to you from cradle to... Well, cradle is impossible, but I'd at least like to tend to you till the grave. And...after that too. You're never getting away from me, you

bastard!”

I scoffed. “You’re a bit too blockheaded to be a demon, if you ask me.”

“And who’s the damn chicken who gave his first kiss to that blockhead?” she immediately shot back.

It was a low blow—it knocked me to my knees. “Hey,” I said weakly. “You know that’s off-limits. Just... Just forget it ever happened!”

“No,” Boinga said simply, wrapping her arms around herself. “It’s an important memory to me, so I will keep it burned into my memory banks forever. I’ve put several layers of protection over it and have already saved a backup. Just that memory alone would be enough to keep me fighting forever!”

I could barely understand even half of what she was saying, but I’d gleaned enough to comprehend that she’d declared she’d never forget what I’d done.

I sighed. *Can’t we do something about her unnecessarily high performance?*

“Whatever,” I said finally. “I’m going to Professor Damian’s place.”

“Let me go with you!” Boinga yelled. “Give me just a second. I’ll get ready fast; I just have to push the housework and a few other tasks onto that vixen.”

Boinga ran out of the shed. A few moments later, I followed and closed the door behind me.

“What is she, really?” I asked aloud, sighing deeply.

And how am I going to deal with such an absurd creature from now on...?

“Oh, that’s right,” I heard the third head mumble from inside the Jewel. “Lyle, do you have a moment?”

I looked around, confirming no one was nearby, and then said, “Sure, what is it?”

“Well, we’ve been doing a bit of thinking actually,” he said casually. “So, we’re banning you from using Arts and that silver broadsword of the founder’s for a while, okay?”

I froze. “Huh...?”

“The ban will be in effect until you clear the thirtieth floor without them,

using only your own strength,” the fourth head chimed in. “Good luck.”

“Oh, but you can still use the floor-transfer device,” the fifth head went on to say. “It would be a bit cruel for us to ban that too. But you should give it some thought before you decide to use it. You might run into some issues, jumping straight to floor twenty-five without your Arts to guide you.”

The sixth head let out a roaring laugh; he seemed to be having a blast. “Anyway, you get the picture, Lyle—don’t use our Arts. If you do...”

“Then we’ll start making a ruckus at any and all hours of the day,” the seventh head finished. “You’ll have to say goodbye to your peaceful mornings and restful nights.”

The third head laughed. “We’ll bother you even when you have a good thing going with Novem or any of the other girls. In fact, how about we provide live commentary when you do?”

I shivered. Not that. Anything but that... I mean, that horrible of a penalty for using Arts is going way too far! How am I supposed to live with six men making a ruckus all day? That’s just torture!

And that wasn’t even mentioning what the third head had threatened to do. If they followed through on that, I wouldn’t be able to actually enjoy any of the moments I had with Novem, even if the mood was good. Worse yet, I wouldn’t be able to build up the confidence to take things any further.

Despair filled me. I couldn’t muster a single word to my lips.

“Use this opportunity to do some thinking on your end, all right?” the second head said, wrapping things up. “I’ve got high hopes for you, Lyle.”

What should I do?! I moaned internally. This is really getting outrageous...

4

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Yomu Mishima
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Tomozo

Lyle's eyes
dropped to the
ground. He
muttered...

“Um...
I'm hitting
on you.”

SEVENTH



Miranda
shot me
a smile.

“Oh, so
that’s what
happened,”

I’d never
imagined that
I’d come across
Novem, Aria,
and Sophia at
the same café.

So...it seems
everyone thinks
that I’m a
pathetic guy
who came to
apologize along
with a whole
group of
girlfriends, huh?
I thought,
shriveling
inside.

“I’m really, really sorry!!!”



**“You’re
a fool.
Did you
honestly
believe
I was a
good
girl?”**

**“I’ll
never
forgive
you.”**

Right then
and there,
Shannon made
a vow to
herself.



*She only
has one arm...?*
I wondered,
intrigued.
I activated the
second head's
Art, using it
to examine
the girl—
**Clara
Bulmer's—**
armor-clad
left arm.





She pinched
the hem of
her skirt
between her
fingers and
lifted it as
she lowered
her head.

The automaton
stood from the
bed and turned
toward me.















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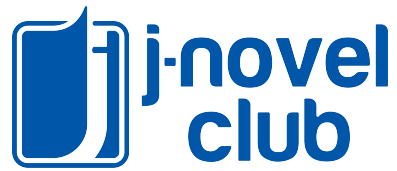
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Seventh: Volume 4

by Yomu Mishima

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SEVENTH 4

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2023

Premium E-Book for faratnis